



James B. Rowell (1888-1973) portrait taken in 1942.

JAMES B. ROWELL
1888 - 1973

by Aaron Dunlop

In the 1800's the British Empire was the heart-beat of world economy, and its navy the veins that carried the Industrial Revolution to every part of the world. In Britain, morale was high and unemployment was low. Numerous social reforms and philanthropic endeavors had gone a long way to alleviate the poverty and suffering among the "dark satanic mills" of which William Blake had written. It seemed that the mid 1800's were, at least socio-economically, "the best times that England has ever seen."¹

The religious scene was not so encouraging. Changes within the Church had taken place over the previous century that were not at first discernable. Among the dissenters—Baptists and Congregationalists—the theological shift was so profound that it amounted essentially to a change of creed; Arminianism had replaced the theology of the Reformers and Puritans.² C. H. Spurgeon had to concede that "the tide was not for Calvinism but against it."³ Indeed, Mr. Spurgeon stood "alone among the leaders of Evangelical Non-Conformity in his fidelity to the older Calvinistic creed."⁴

Theological Liberalism, also, had chilled the spiritual life of the Church and gave rise to the Down-Grade Controversy, resulting in Spurgeon's separation from the Baptist Union, and the national Church of England was reeling from the Tractarian Movement. The Anglican Bishop of Liverpool, J. C. Ryle, an evangelical, was struggling to maintain the "old paths" against the rise of both Liberalism and Tractarianism.⁵

¹ J. C. Ryle, *Christian Leaders of the 18th Century* (1885; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1990), 19.

² Ian Seller, *Nineteenth-Century Nonconformity* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1977), 21-35.

³ Iain H. Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1966), 176.

⁴ R. W. Dale, *The Evangelical Revival and Other Sermons* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1880), 21.

⁵ *Old Paths* appeared in 1877, along with *Knots Untied*. In 1888, Bishop Ryle was in the heat of battle with James Bell Cox for his ritualism in St.

Furthermore, dearly held religious dogmas were now openly assaulted in the public square. In 1866, Charles Bradlaugh had established the National Secular Society and twenty years later became the first to take a seat in the British Parliament without a religious oath. In the 1880's then, while England was enjoying substantial social reform and economic development, it was experiencing such a national religious shift that the opinion of the day considered that decade, the decade of unbelief.⁶

Raised in “the home of a thousand mercies”

James Bavin Rowell was born March 28, 1888, and, in contrast to the national decay, the Rowell home was a pious and Calvinistic home. James's father, Francis, came to faith after a near death experience and was spiritually exercised during a long period of convalescence. Francis recorded in his diary:

‘I had no man to teach me the way of salvation.’ As he read his New Testament, he wrote in his diary, ‘I was led to see in a very gentle and a gradual way that the Lord was a Sovereign to give his pardoning love and mercy to whom he will, that it was not of him that willeth but of God that sheweth mercy to whom he will shew mercy.’⁷

As Francis spoke of this to his friend, he was shocked at the “enmity” towards the conclusions to which he was coming; “I well remember,” he continues, “him getting up quick and throughing [throwing] his arm around saying, ‘why that is real Calvinism’.” He continues in his diary: “I said in my heart that I did not care what he called it, for I knew that it was the truth as I had been taught it in reading the Word of God.”⁸

Francis found a spiritual home in the Salem Strict and Particular Baptist Chapel in Peterborough. It was there that he met Miss Anna Parrott, the daughter of a grocer and draper. The

Margaret's Church.

⁶ Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1970), 2: 112.

⁷ Francis Rowell, Diary, McMaster University Archives, Rowell Archives, Box 4.1.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Parrott family maintained an exemplary Christian testimony in the Peterborough business community and in the Strict Baptist Chapel of which they were members.

Francis and Anna were married in Peterborough on February 21, 1877, in St. Mark's Parish Church, and were blessed with ten children; seven girls and three boys. On all accounts, the Rowell home was a happy and affectionate one. James was greatly influenced by his father's “saintly life” and his mother's “gracious influence could not be overestimated.” James's brother Vincent wrote of their father, “I do think I never knew a man who walked his religion so well as he did, and he has left us a noble example of what the life of a child of God ought to be in word and deed.”⁹ Anna, also, in her death bore a good witness. The *Gospel Standard* recorded of her: “the contents of the diary which she kept for years are those of a deeply exercised child of God.”¹⁰ The Rowell home, then, as James said, was “the home of a thousand mercies,” in which he was grounded in sound Calvinistic theology and in a solid education.

In the 1901 census, James was thirteen years old and is registered as an “outfitters errand boy.” In 1903, he took a job with a baker and confectioner, and began to serve his time in that trade. By December of 1906, however, he was in financial difficulties. His older sister and mentor, Cathie, admonished him about his many trips on the sea and his “season ticket” at Bournemouth, concluding, “I should think you would rather be in business.”¹¹ Two years later, after his conversion, he acknowledged regretfully that he was, at that time, “looked upon as a lazy and good-for-nothing by many.”¹²

Call to the Gospel ministry

The turning point came on the 25th of August 1907. On that Lord's day as the preacher opened the Scripture, the Holy Spirit,

⁹ Letters, December 29, 1924, McMaster University Archives, Rowell Archives, Box 6, File 3.

¹⁰ *The Gospel Standard*, 87 (1918), No. 991 (July): 218.

¹¹ Letters, June 27, 1907, McMaster University Archives, Rowell Archives, Box 6, File 1.

¹² Letters, Aug. 23, 1909, McMaster University Archives, Rowell Archives, Box 6, File 1.

as James liked to say, “*put my heart under divine arrest.*” James was a changed young man and soon felt exercised towards a preaching ministry. As he sat under the ministry of the Word each week, he felt that the Lord was saying to him “that is your work.”¹³ This sense of calling was confirmed for him after a preaching engagement in Pontypridd, Wales, when the innkeeper’s daughter came to Christ. He enrolled at Kensit Memorial College, the training college of the Protestant Truth Society (P.T.S.), in April 1909.

The P.T.S. was established in 1889 and was part of the last wave of anti-ritualism in England.¹⁴ The Society came to national attention in September 1902, when the founder, John Kensit, was attacked and killed in Liverpool.¹⁵ The college was established in 1905 and named in memory of Mr. Kensit. James had attended lectures at the college and was impressed by the depth of teaching and the vibrant presentation of the truth.¹⁶ This college and the ministry of the P.T.S. would shape James’s entire life and ministry—he gave himself to the defense of the faith and opposing Roman Catholicism and ritualism in England’s National Church. Ritualism was, in the mind of many, a national threat, and many non-conformists like James, fought ritualism in the National Church as though they themselves were Anglicans; for them it was not simply a matter of theological aberrance, but of national identity. “[W]e took our stand,” James said, “as member of the Anglican Church...in defence of the principles of Protestantism as held by the Protestant Church, the national Church of England.”¹⁷

After leaving college, he joined the Wickliffe Preachers of the P.T.S. and very quickly distinguished himself, becoming a leader of a band of five preachers. In February of the following year, he received a letter of recommendation from his church stating:

¹³ Grace Eno, *Courageous For Christ* (Victoria: Eno, 1989), 10.

¹⁴ G. I. T. Machin, “The Last Victorian Anti-Ritualist Campaign, 1895-1906,” in *Victorian Studies*, 25, No. 3 (1982): 277-302. Accessed online.

¹⁵ J. C. Wilcox, *Contending for the Faith: An Authentic History of the Life and Martyrdom of John Kensit and the Work that He Founded* (1902; repr. London: Protestant Truth Society, 1989), 52-76.

¹⁶ Eno, *Courageous For Christ*, 10.

¹⁷ James Rowell, Men’s Fellowship, audio recording, 1970, McMaster University Archives, Rowell Archives, Box 6, File 5.

I am pleased to recommend Mr. J. B. Rowell to the notice of Strict Baptist Churches...as one professing Free Grace doctrines and desires to proclaim the truth as it is in Jesus.¹⁸

As they traveled the country, local newspapers carried the news of rallies and open-air meetings and often recorded the accounts of riots and the general unrest that followed the anti-ritualists protests.¹⁹ One incident in particular, “The Removal of the Idols,” which occupied the Sheffield newspapers for several weeks, was reported as “one of the most daring outrages ever planned and successfully carried out by the Wickliffe Preachers.”²⁰ On Saturday morning, January 20, 1912, James and his friend John Waterman walked boldly into St. Matthew’s Anglican Church in the center of Sheffield and removed the large Madonna and Child from its stand, along with a few smaller items, and transported them by train to the Bishop’s Palace in York. No damage came to the objects and there were no charges against the protesters because the items remained on the property of the Church. This protest became the stuff of legend among the Wickliffe Preachers and opened the door for many speaking engagements, rallies and continued protests across the country.

This method of ministry, however, was physically and emotionally exhausting, and many men could not sustain it.²¹ By the spring of 1912, James himself was mentally and physically exhausted. He was suffering from pneumonia, pleurisy, and, in the end, had suffered a “nervous break-down.”²² He wrote, “I have had to walk much in the valley of doubt and perplexity. I have felt surrounded by darkness.” In May 1910, he had met a young lady,

¹⁸ Letters, Feb. 2, 1910, McMaster University Archives, Rowell Archives, Box 6, File 2.

¹⁹ Frank Neal, “The Resurgence of No Popery Politics” in *Sectarian Violence: The Liverpool Experience, 1819-1914: An Aspect of Anglo-Irish History*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 125-223.

²⁰ *Yorkshire Telegraph and Star*, Monday Evening, January 22, 1912.

²¹ James Rowell, “At times the work was so strenuous, and so nerve racking, that more than one man had to leave the work, with nerves thoroughly broken down...” Cited in Eno, *Courageous For Christ*, 15.

²² Letters, June 24, 1915, McMaster University Archives, Rowell Archives, Box 6, File 2.

Lucy Kelk, from an upper middle class home in London. Lucy's parents had attended Spurgeon's Metropolitan Tabernacle, where her mother had been converted and her father was the assistant superintendent of Spurgeon's Orphanage Sunday school. Lucy was a tall, elegant young lady, as well as a godly woman who possessed a strong will, a quick wit and an adventurous spirit.

Removal to Canada and service in World War I

Forced to leave the P.T.S. and find a more suitable climate, James applied to Brandon College in Manitoba, where he registered as a matriculating student in January 1913. In addition to his studies, James was preaching also in the towns and villages around Brandon. He adapted well to life in Canada, and he and Lucy were considering the possibility of a life and ministry in Canada.

However, the war in Europe interrupted his time in Brandon. Every letter from England pressed home the call to duty, as friends and acquaintances were reported wounded or killed. In April 1916, James enlisted as a stretcher-bearer with the 11th Canadian Field Ambulance.

Field Ambulances—seldom mentioned in the annals of war—were non-combatant units at the bottom of the battle order, the back of every dress parade and generally removed from the front line of attack. Their task, however, was a dangerous and difficult one. Known as “body-snatchers,” the stretcher-bearers were responsible for the evacuation and treatment of battle casualties. Running over the cratered battlefield, with the rattle of machine-gun fire and its indiscriminate swathe of death, and with the whistle of sniper's bullets, they turned over bodies looking for signs of life—and then raced back to safety with the living.

Notwithstanding the obvious dangers, James was not afraid of these front-line maneuvers; he regretted those times when ill-health prevented him going. “Some of our boys” he writes, “are at the front, but I was sorry I couldn't go on account of being down with influenza.”²³ On another occasion, shortly after arriving at the Somme in northern France, James recounted his experience as a “body-snatcher” at the Red Chateau. In a letter to Lucy on the 17th of October 1916, he wrote:

²³ Letters, Nov. 16, 1916, McMaster University Archives, Rowell Archives, Box 6, File 2.

We came from the front this morning. There was a heavy mist which served us well. I can assure you I am thankful to have been able to serve a ‘bit’ and to have returned safely.²⁴

Marriage and return to Canada

In February 1917, after continued bouts of illness, he was removed from the front lines and spent several months in a hospital in England. It was during this time in England that he and Lucy got married. In January of 1918, James was confirmed not fit for duty and was invalided back to Winnipeg, where he had enlisted, suffering from, among other things, trench mouth and chronic bronchitis.

Disappointed by his circumstances, James arrived in Winnipeg in April 1918. His new wife preceded him on a war-bride ship. He never considered himself a true war veteran because of the short time he had served, but all who served at the Somme knew that, “one single tour of duty at the Red Chateau produced seasoned men.”²⁵

Between September 1918 and December 1919, James was engaged in two posts in British Columbia: Vernon and Prince Rupert. These two pastorates ended in disappointment. Despite the blessings of God on his ministry and growth in both works, the climate necessitated James return to England for convalescence in January 1920. It was when he was in England that he received an invitation to return to British Columbia, this time to pastor the Baptist church in Kamloops, which had been closed for six years during the war and had considerable debt remaining on the building.

When James arrived after a six-year cessation, the people were dispersed and, when he visited previous members of the congregation, he discovered considerable opposition. Discouraged, but undeterred, James placed an ad in the local paper, which read: “Regular services will be started (D.V.) in the Baptist Church...A new pastor, a new organisation, but ‘The old, old, story of God's redeeming love.’” In the same ad he announced a prayer meeting in the pastor's house the Friday evening prior to the reopening.²⁶

²⁴ Letters, Oct. 17, 1916, McMaster University Archives, Rowell Archives, Box 6, File 2.

²⁵ Lt. Col. Dr. J. D. McQueen, *Dairy of the Eleventh*, Preface.

²⁶ *Kamloops Standard-Sentinel*, November 19, 1920, 5.

From the very beginning of the work in Kamloops, James displayed tremendous dedication of time and effort in teaching the people. Preaching from an outline, he began to type his sermons on a single sheet. Afterthoughts and annotations were written on the side in Pitman Shorthand. His preaching was conversational in style, didactic in content; he was precise and scholarly in his research, yet warm, experiential and thoroughly evangelistic. He was innovative also—perhaps eccentric—in his methodology, harnessing modern technology and methods for the sake of the gospel. A small printing press in his home churned out flyers for special meetings, gospel tracts and, for a period, a *Weekly Bulletin* for the Kamloops Church. “Chalk-talks” were common for the children and behind the pulpit two large hooks became a permanent fixture on which he hanged his teaching charts on a Sunday evening. These hand-drawn charts were colorfully painted, some on paper, and others on large lengths of canvas. When he exhausted his artistic skill, he secured the help of local artists.

According to Ruth Balf, a prominent Kamloops historian, evangelism in Kamloops “enjoyed a swell of popularity during the 1920’s.”²⁷ Balf attributes this chiefly to the work of the Seventh Day Adventists (S.D.A.’s). The work of the S.D.A.’s however, was a short but concentrated effort between 1923 and 1925, which gave a disproportionate view of their achievement. Furthermore, the S.D.A.’s were regarded with suspicion by the other Protestant churches in the city, which the S.D.A. missionary discovered when he inquired about the use of a baptistery—he reported that he was not “able to secure the baptistery of any of the churches in Kamloops.”²⁸ Many evangelicals, like James, considered the S.D.A. organization to be a cult.²⁹

In contrast to this short-lived endeavor by the S.D.A.’s, James, in cooperation with an emphasis encouraged by the Convention at that time, maintained an evangelistic drive throughout the 1920’s.³⁰ Despite his physical weakness and recurring sickness, which was

²⁷ Ruth Balf, *Kamloops 1914-1945* (Kamloops: History Committee, Kamloops Museum, 1975), 75.

²⁸ *Western Canadian Tidings*, Vol. 14, No. 11 (May 21, 1924): 5.

²⁹ James Bavin Rowell, *Seventh-Day Adventism Examined*. Susanville, CA: Challenge Publishing Co., 1960.

³⁰ John H. Pickford, *What Hath God Wrought. Sixty Years of God’s Goodness in the Fellowship of Regular Baptist Churches of British Columbia* (Vancouver: Baptist Foundation of B.C., 1987), 23.

often severe and debilitating, James and the Kamloops Baptist church brought a sustained infusion of evangelistic zeal and energy, which extended beyond the city limits. “Some outsiders expressed surprise at the large muster of Kamloops Baptists.”³¹

Within two months of His arrival in Kamloops, James had initiated a week of united prayer with the Methodists, Anglicans and Presbyterians. In 1923, he “held a two-week evangelistic campaign in association with the Methodists and Presbyterians.”³² In July of 1921, James commenced services in the Tranquille Sanatorium, a treatment center for tuberculosis patients. This emphasis on evangelism was consistent throughout the 1920’s and was the swell of evangelistic activity that Kamloops experienced. In June 1927, *The B.C. Baptist* reported a “manifest deepening of the spiritual life of the church and people.” The Baptist church in Kamloops was once again “one of the most promising fields in the convention.”

The fundamentalist/liberal controversy and formation of The Convention of Regular Baptists of British Columbia

Despite all the blessing and encouragement that James enjoyed in Kamloops, his entire ministry there was overshadowed by a controversy that was dividing the Baptist Convention of British Columbia. The fundamentalist/liberal controversy was raging at that time across North America, but in the early 1920’s the battle was hotter and the rupture more imminent in British Columbia than anywhere else.

The fundamentalist/liberal controversy had burst more generally onto the public scene in Vancouver in 1917, when French E. Oliver, an American fundamentalist evangelist, polarized the church scene in Vancouver.³³ Oliver’s campaign was reported as “the biggest sensation...in Vancouver religious circles.” Pulpit rhetoric, name-calling and angry exchanges came from both sides of the debate and added more heat than light. Oliver’s 1917 protest lacked discernment and direction and was very much a flash in the pan.

For the B.C. Baptists, the controversy had focus, tangibility and strategy. Back in late 1915 or early 1916, five senior students,

³¹ *The B.C. Baptist*, Vol. 1, No. 6 (June 1926), 8.

³² Balf, *Kamloops 1914-1945*, 2: 75.

³³ Robert Burkinshaw, *Pilgrims in Lotus Land* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University, 1995), 41-54.

including James, had been unsettled by the liberal teaching in Brandon College, Manitoba, the only Bible college servicing the Baptists of Western Canada. The controversy centered particularly around Professor Harris Lachlan MacNeill (1871-1974). At that time, the students approached the college principle, Dr. H. P. Whidden, and voiced their concerns. Nothing came of that meeting, even though a “definite promise was made by Dr. Whidden” to consider it.³⁴

In 1919, the Alberta Baptists, at Crescent Heights Baptist Church, were the next to raise the Brandon issue in an exchange of letters with the College.³⁵ It was the British Columbia brethren, however, who took the battle to the gate, when Arnold Bennett, a British-born pastor in Vancouver and former student at Brandon, charged Professor MacNeill with heretical views.³⁶ When these charges were investigated by the Ministerial Association of Greater Vancouver, they were satisfied with the answers received from Brandon on the “definite understanding that MacNeill was ‘leaving anyway at the end of the year’ ” and they did not want him leaving “under a cloud.”³⁷

Yet, MacNeill did not leave, and the issue resurfaced in January 1922, when Bennett published a pamphlet against his alma mater, with contributions from James Rowell and others affirming MacNeill’s liberal views. The pamphlet was distributed to Baptist churches across Canada and had significant impact on the financial contributions to the College.³⁸ Bennett’s pamphlet was scathing, and, along with other “interested laymen” in another publication, raised concerns of financial policies. James also published at this time against the modernist trend in the churches.³⁹

³⁴ Arnold Bennett, *The MacNeill Teaching Controversy*. S. J. McKee Archives, Brandon University; R81-30, Series 1, Subseries 4B, Box 2, File 2.

³⁵ Samantha Thompson, “Brandon College and the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy, 1919-1926” (Calgary University, unpublished thesis, 1990), 54.

³⁶ John B. Richards, *Baptists in British Columbia* (Vancouver: Northwest Baptist Theological Seminary, 1977), 74-77.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 75.

³⁸ Thompson, “Brandon College and the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy, 1919-1926,” 74.

³⁹ See James Rowell, *A Great Gulf Fixed: “The Scripture of Truth” versus The Substitutes of Modernism* (no date, no publisher).

The conservatives, or fundamentalists, heightened their protest in 1925, with the formation of the “British Columbia Baptist Missionary Council.” They also produced their own publication, *The B.C. Baptist*, with the purpose of channeling funds away from the liberals and Brandon College and providing a trusted outlet for the gospel. Pastor Rowell and the Kamloops Church unanimously threw their lot in with the conservative Missionary Council after three “specially announced meetings” in July 1925, to discuss the controversy in the Convention.⁴⁰

On June 27-30, 1927, the Baptist Convention of British Columbia met in Vancouver. On Wednesday the 29th, the Convention voted to change the constitution and include a “disciplinary clause.” This new clause effectively expelled the members of the Missionary Council from the Convention. The decision was made for them—they had to leave. They had, of course anticipated this move and plans for a new Convention were set in motion. The members of the board were authorized “to proceed with such steps as it is believed necessary for the preservation of our work in British Columbia.”⁴¹ The following day, June 30th, the new body drew up its constitution and Articles of Faith based on the New Hampshire Confession, “with certain additions and changes in order more adequately to express the fundamentalist position.”⁴² On the 1st of July 1927, at a meeting in Mount Pleasant Baptist Church, what was The British Columbia Baptist Missionary Council became The Convention of Regular Baptists of British Columbia.

Along with fifteen other churches, Pastor Rowell and the Kamloops Church separated from the old Convention and joined with the newly-constituted Convention of Regular Baptists. This was “the first formal denominational schism in Baptist ranks in all of North America over the modernist/fundamentalist issue.”⁴³

On October 11, 1927, the old Convention board met to protest the name used by the new Convention,⁴⁴ and on December 20th it

⁴⁰ *The B.C. Baptist*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Feb. 1926): 7.

⁴¹ *The B.C. Baptist*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (July 1927): 1.

⁴² Gordon H. Pousett, *The History of the Regular Baptists of British Columbia* (Toronto: McMaster University, 1956), 72, footnote 1.

⁴³ Burkinshaw, *Pilgrims in Lotus Land*, 5.

⁴⁴ John B. Richards, *Baptists in British Columbia* (Vancouver: Northwest Baptist Theological Seminary, 1977), 98.

petitioned the Lieutenant Governor in Council that the newly-formed Convention of Regular Baptists be “dissolved and its incorporation revoked under Section 33 of the Societies Act.”⁴⁵

Rowell successfully represented the new Convention in a masterful defense of the name chosen by the new Convention. He defended the use of the word “regular” in relation to Baptist church polity on two points; the autonomy of the local church and on the issue of closed communion, both of which, he said, were threatened by the old Convention. He informed the attorney general that the fundamentalists had been

driven to the position of being separate in principles and policy by the drift from the old Baptist positions, we sought to bring about harmony in the General Convention by bringing the Convention to accept a Statement of Faith which would bring us together, and when we attended the Convention, we attended with this thought in mind.⁴⁶

The charge against the fundamentalists is well known—that the methods used were inconsistent with the truth they were defending. There may have been a belligerence, a lack of regard for principled procedure and a disregard for personal relationships.⁴⁷ These charges may have carried weight in the case of Oliver’s 1917 campaign, and perhaps even in Bennett’s protest, but they could not be levelled against James Rowell.

The fundamentalists in British Columbia led the charge as separatist fundamentalists and were unique in their methodology of separation among their counterparts in North America.⁴⁸ Many of the Baptists, like Rowell, were brought in from Britain to replace wartime losses in British Columbia. These British-born fundamentalists looked to Spurgeon for their model and were

⁴⁵ *The B.C. Baptist*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Feb. 1928): 1.

⁴⁶ James Rowell, “The Genesis of B.C. Regular Baptists,” unpublished papers, 1959, McMaster University Archives, Rowell Archives, Box 1, File 10.

⁴⁷ George A. Rawlyk, *Canadian Baptists and Christian Higher Education* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1988), 34.

⁴⁸ Mark Noll, and George A. Rawlyk, eds., *Amazing Grace: Evangelicalism in Australia, Britain, Canada, and the United States*, (Toronto: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), 341-342.

moderated by a more discerning separatism.⁴⁹ The ultra-separatist mentality of the 1950’s-1960’s that developed in other parts of America did not develop in British Columbia.

James’s sanguine nature and moderation in the controversy was evident. He preached at the 1926 Convention in Victoria—the last fundamentalist to preach before the old Convention. His subject was “The Conflicts of the Church,” and no one was in any doubt regarding his fundamentalist position or of the thrust of his message.⁵⁰ He spoke clearly of the “vortex of modernism” into which the Church was being drawn and he warned of its insidious nature, whereby the Church is “scarcely perceptible” of the drift. While his message was not enough to persuade the Convention, yet his defense of the faith was clear and moderate, appealing for unity in the gospel.

While others had adopted a more aggressive approach and raised the ire of many, James maintained a steady moderate approach and his urbane manner won the respect of his peers. As the “Vancouver Representative for the Interior,” he became an effective spokesman for conservatism in rural British Columbia.⁵¹ When the new denomination formed and considered its strategies for growth in the province’s capital, “the ideal man for this thrust on Vancouver Island, was Rev. James Bavin Rowell.”⁵² Many had already felt that the Lord “had a larger place for him.”⁵³ Eight months before his fortieth birthday, Rowell received a request to represent the new Convention in the capital, and establish a church there.

On Sunday, August 28, 1927, James “regretfully submitted” a letter of resignation to the congregation in Kamloops. He informed

⁴⁹ *The B.C. Baptist*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Nov. 1925): 2-3.

⁵⁰ *The B.C. Baptist*, Vol. 1, No. 9 (Sept. 1926): 1.

⁵¹ *The B.C. Baptist*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Feb. 1926): 1. See also David F. Holm, *A Comparative History of Armstrong, Ruth Morton and Central Baptist Church* (The University of Victoria, 1968), 23; “Probably one of the most important dates in the history of the Armstrong Baptist Church was November 5th 1925. Rev. J. B. Rowell, from Kamloops, addressed the Armstrong congregation, and forwarded his views on the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy then raging in Brandon College.” It was after this that the Armstrong Church voted to join the newly formed Missionary Council in protest against the modernism in the denomination.

⁵² Pickford, *What Hath God Wrought*, 66.

⁵³ *The B.C. Baptist*, Vol. 2, No. 11 (Oct. 1927): 5

the congregation that he “agreed to consider this call only on the understanding that the Board of our Convention would give the Kamloops Church their best attention, and not leave the Church without a pastor.”⁵⁴

When Rowell arrived in Victoria, he had the names of five people who were “interested in a Fundamentalist Church” in the city. Details for the establishment were quickly put in place and by the beginning of December, the Central Baptist Church was organised with twenty-two charter members. Within a few months it was financially independent.

On September 20, 1928, at a Member’s Meeting, the membership established an “Extension Committee” in response to a request from Pastor Rowell, who was looking for a place in the western communities of Victoria to hold an outreach Sunday school.⁵⁵ In 1930, Rev. F. T. Tapscott resigned from Sluggett Memorial Church in Brentwood Bay, about twenty kilometers north of Victoria. The members requested Pastor Rowell to take oversight of the vacant Church. This church, previously a member of the old Convention, subsequently became affiliated with the recently established Convention of Regular Baptist Churches. The following year, one of the deacons wrote:

the arrangement (with Central Baptist) was only temporary ...but it has proved entirely satisfactory and beyond our highest hopes. We have had preaching of the highest order, and more real, loving Christian fellowship than we received in all the previous twenty years.⁵⁶

In 1929, Pastor Rowell began a monthly magazine called *The Advent Evangel*. He also began a ministry to the orphans in the Protestant Orphanage (now the Cridge Centre for the Family) and a radio ministry in 1934, which he financed personally and maintained for fifteen years—every Sunday and a fifteen-minute program Monday to Friday on the same station.⁵⁷ In addition to

⁵⁴ Letters, Aug. 28, 1927, McMaster University Archives, Rowell Archives, Box 6, File 3.

⁵⁵ *Minutes of the Central Baptist Church Members Meeting*, September 20, 1928.

⁵⁶ Donald Reed, *Sluggett Memorial Fellowship Baptist Church 1891-1991*, (Victoria, B.C.: Unpublished MS., 1991), 10.

⁵⁷ Holm, *A Comparative History of Armstrong, Ruth Morton, and Central*

this, James managed to find time to further his education. In 1934, he earned his Bachelor’s degree from The Los Angeles Baptist Theological Seminary (now The Master’s University). In 1936, he earned a Doctorate in Theology from the same institution after two years of study and a thesis on “The Epistle of Hebrews and its Difficulties.”⁵⁸ In the July-September 1937 edition of *Bibliotheca Sacra*, his “Exposition of Hebrews Six” appeared. The position argued in the article was novel and was later adopted by Dr. J. Vernon Magee on his “Thru The Bible” radio program.

Meanwhile the new congregation in Victoria was witnessing immediate growth. Rowell was elected president of the Convention of Regular Baptists in 1928 and again in 1935. On the cusp of an economic depression which affected the continent, the cornerstone of the new building on Pandora Avenue was laid on the 29th of March 1929, and the key was officially turned in the door on August 31st of the same year. Central Baptist quickly became “one of the largest in the Regular Convention and a ‘mother Church’ to a number of Vancouver Island home mission causes.”⁵⁹

James reached out in every direction with the gospel. He was not afraid of the potential for failure as he experienced in some endeavors, such as James Bay, Cadboro Bay, and in the Willows area of the city.⁶⁰ Satellite Sunday schools and daughter churches which began at this time were Luxton (April 1931), Langford (1933), Duncan (1938), and Bethel Baptist in Sidney (1938).

The Convention of Regular Baptists was growing—mission churches were established and congregations that had remained in the old Convention later joined the separatist fundamentalist Convention. By the 1950’s the new Convention had more congregations than the old Convention from which it separated.⁶¹ These conservatives however, struggled to get a sustainable

Baptist Churches, 155.

⁵⁸ *The B.C. Baptist* (Feb. 1937), cited in Holm, *A Comparative History of Armstrong, Ruth Morton and Central as Regular Baptist Churches*, 73, note 207.

⁵⁹ Richards, *Baptists in British Columbia*, 94.

⁶⁰ Holm, *A Comparative History of Armstrong, Ruth Morton, and Central Baptist Churches*, 153-154.

⁶¹ Robert Burkinshaw, “Conservative Evangelicalism in the Twentieth-Century ‘West,’ ” in Noll and Rawlyk, eds., *Amazing Grace: Evangelicalism in Australia, Britain, Canada, and the United States*, 342.

college established. Men were going to various fundamentalist schools in Canada and the U.S. Two young people had gone out from Pastor Rowell's church in Victoria; one to Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, and another to Toronto Baptist Seminary.⁶² Some, like George Dawe and Lorimer Baker went to BIOLA in Los Angeles, while others, like Rowell himself, forged links on the west coast and furthered their theological education at the Los Angeles Baptist Theological Seminary. In the February 1928 issue of *The B.C. Baptist*, the Convention announced the possibility of a Bible school in British Columbia:

The need for such an institution has been coming up again in the work of many of our ministers among their young people. Young men are coming to us inquiring what qualifications are necessary for ministerial standing in our Convention, and wondering why we do not have a college.⁶³

There had been various attempts to fill this gap, but they had proved unsuccessful. In 1929, the Regular Baptist Bible Institute was organized in Vancouver.⁶⁴ Also in 1929, night classes were organized in Ruth Morton Memorial, also in Vancouver. The following year, the Convention announced that it was organizing classes in Broadway West Baptist Church.⁶⁵ Then in 1931, Pastor Rowell began the Victoria Bible School, which convened every Tuesday evening for three one-hour classes. Courses offered in the school included New Testament Greek, Bible Introduction, Public Speaking and Personal Evangelism. Classes continued until the late 1930's and proved the most successful attempt to date.

In 1945, the Convention reconsidered the subject of an educational institution when premises became available in Vancouver. In June of that year, the Convention purchased the Vancouver Fundamental College and, combining the earlier efforts of Morley Hall and the Western Baptist Bible College in Calgary, established the Northwest Baptist Bible College in Vancouver. James had been involved in the negotiations for the new property,

⁶² *The B.C. Baptist*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (April 1931): 12.

⁶³ Cited in Eno, *Courageous For Christ*, 163.

⁶⁴ Pickford, *What Hath God Wrought*, 79; see also *Western Regular Baptist*, Vol. 18, No. 5 (May 1966): 3.

⁶⁵ Pickford, *What Hath God Wrought*, 79.

and when the time came to present the project to the Baptist people, Dr. Rowell was the best advocate for the college and set out around British Columbia to raise funds.⁶⁶ Eight young people from his own congregation formed the first year's student body, while he became the first president of the College, and later the chancellor. In 1968, he was awarded an honorary Doctorate from the college.⁶⁷ He was also awarded a certificate of appreciation in 1970 for his contribution to the college and again posthumously in 1995.

Meanwhile, the Central Baptist Church had become the "center of evangelism" on Vancouver Island. Dr. Rowell never lost his zeal for evangelism. His defense of the faith was always with the view to disseminate that faith. He was not controversial for the sake of controversy. He believed in a vital faith and often warned against a stagnant faith. While he was Calvinistic in his theology, he believed firmly in the responsibility of man, both in conversion and consequently in evangelism. The Strict Baptists back in England concerned him in this regard. In 1917, he wrote to Lucy from the trenches in France:

I believe they dwell so much, even to excess, on some of the X'n [Christian] doctrines that they lose sight of the principles of Jesus regarding personal effort.⁶⁸

Evangelism, therefore, was the animus of his life and ministry. Whether it was a seven-year-old boy on the street in Kamloops, or the engineers during a tour of an engine-room on a cruise ship, or pilgrims climbing the steps of St. Joseph Cathedral in Montréal, or a priest sitting across the aisle in a train carriage, Pastor Rowell seized every opportunity for the gospel. He distributed his own gospel literature and for many years, he and his brother Andrew in England maintained an extensive gospel tract ministry across the world in many different languages. When he arrived in Victoria, he began an open-air ministry with the young people in the downtown area. In the early 1940's, he seized the opportunity of wartime activity and ministered to the servicemen in the

⁶⁶ Northwest Baptist Bible College *Prospectus*, 1946-1947, 6.

⁶⁷ Ian Bowie, *Jack and Albert Pickford: Builders of a Baptist Legacy* (Richmond: Baptist Foundations of B.C., 1999), 150.

⁶⁸ Letters, Feb. 25, 1917, McMaster University Archives, Rowell Archives, Box 6, File 2.

Esquimalt naval base. Many servicemen met their wives in Central Baptist Church and settled in the city after the war—thereby Central witnessed another period of growth.

Exposing the errors of Roman Catholicism

There were times, of course, that Dr. Rowell dug out old notes and lectured on the Tractarian Movement, or the dangers of Roman Catholicism. But British Columbia did not present the same opportunities for this polemic against Rome that other Canadian provinces did. For the most part, James's ministry was evangelistic and opposition to Rome was very much in the background. Conferences and speaking engagements were focused on Biblical subjects and prophecy.

At the end of 1941, however, all of this changed. In September of that year, Dr. T. T. Shields of Toronto, along with others, established the Canadian Protestant League (C.P.L.) in protest to "the tremendous papal influence emanating from Quebec—the Vatican's Western Outpost."⁶⁹ Matters came to a head early in September 1941, when an Ottawa correspondent for the *Gospel Witness* sent a clipping from *The Morning Citizen* to Dr. Shields informing him that a "Pontifical mass will be celebrated on Parliament Hill." The struggle with the Catholics of Quebec during the war years was very much regarded as being part of the war effort and the safety of the Dominion and the Empire.

Dr. Rowell rose to the call of imperial Protestantism. The Protestant League had breathed new life into an old interest that had been lying dormant. Rowell now had an opportunity for his opposition to Roman Catholicism, which he grasped with both hands. For the next three decades, the Canadian Protestant League and anti-Romanist polemic were prominent in his ministry. He toured the country and beyond, reliving the story of "the removal of the idols" in Sheffield. At one point, Dr. Shields asked him to stand in Victoria as a candidate for Parliament in the hope that if he could get enough men across the country, he [Dr. Shields] could form a government.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ T. T. Shields, J. B. Rowell and W. S. Whitcombe, *Why The Canadian Protestant League* (Toronto: Canadian Protestant League, undated), 22.

⁷⁰ Letters, March 1947, McMaster University Archives, Rowell Archives, Box 6, File 5.

Nothing came of this request, and Dr. Rowell's anti-Catholicism did not entertain party politics. He, like many in the Protestant League, were British-born Protestant imperialists who sought to maintain the Reformed faith within the political and social development and structure of the empire.⁷¹ Britain was "God's Empire," with a national and cultural Protestant identity. Anti-Catholicism, necessarily, formed part of the national discourse,⁷² yet, he had no politic intentions.

Dr. Rowell had been well trained in this Protestant imperialism from his days with the P.T.S. His typewriter was busy churning out articles for periodicals across Canada and America. Two Canadian magazines carried his articles on Roman Catholicism: Shields' *Gospel Witness* and the *Protestant Action*, edited by his friend, Les Saunders. By the mid 1950's, the League had its own publication called the *Protestant Challenge*.

Rowell wrote also for the *Sunday School Times* and many devotional and biblical articles appeared in that paper during the 1950's and 1960's. He was busy, however, with articles and booklets in defense of the Protestant faith. Two major protests in writing that Dr. Rowell engaged in were the presidential election campaign of 1959-1960, when John F. Kennedy ran as the first Roman Catholic president of the United States.⁷³ Another significant protest launched by Dr. Rowell was against the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960's. It was during this protest that he prepared his magnum opus, *Papal Infallibility; It's Collapse before a Factual Investigation*, which was published in 1963 by Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

This polemic against Romanism was Rowell's greatest strength and the most prolific aspect of his ministry. He distinguished himself as a scholar in this field, amassing one of the largest collections of books in North America on Romanism. His mind on Roman Catholicism was "almost as encyclopedic as his library."⁷⁴

⁷¹ Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag* (Leicester: Apollos, 1990), 35.

⁷² Hilary M. Carey, *God's Empire: Religious Colonialism in the British World, c. 1801-1908* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 43. See also John Wolf, "Anti-Catholicism and the British Empire, 1815-1914," in Hilary M. Carey, ed., *Empire of Religion* (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 43-63.

⁷³ James Rowell, "Roman Catholic President—A Threat to the Nation," *Christian Heritage*, March 1959.

⁷⁴ *Gospel Witness*, Vol. 29, No. 16 (Aug. 10, 1950): 12.

Dr. T. T. Shields regarded him as “one of the best-informed men in this great controversy in the whole Dominion of Canada.”⁷⁵ In the interest of objectivity, he subscribed to Roman Catholic periodicals and never used other Protestant sources against Rome. Dr. John R. Dunkin, president of Los Angeles Baptist Theological Seminary, said,

there are few evangelical Christians who are specialist in the fields of Roman Catholic Theology...I know of none other who combines such a deep love for Roman Catholics with a discerning exposure of the teachings of Rome, as that of Dr. Rowell. His research is from authoritative Romanist sources and his findings are factual and without bitterness.⁷⁶

The proclivity to engage in an offensive ministry at this point in his life, however, proved problematic. While he was a great personal evangelist and preacher, an educator, a tireless advocate for missions, and a successful church planter; yet the polemic against Roman Catholicism became Dr. Rowell’s most enduring legacy.

The postwar congregation of Central Baptist was struggling for spiritual survival in a confused, increasingly secular and materialistic nation. To them the offensive on Roman Catholicism was not relevant. Behind the scenes in Central Baptist there were whispered desires of the pastor’s retirement, but love for the founding pastor and respect for their faithful shepherd never brought it to open discussion.⁷⁷ It was clear to many on the board, however, that a fresh voice was needed in the pulpit of Central Baptist.

The last years of ministry

In the spring of 1958, Dr. Rowell was seventy years old. The Los Angeles Baptist Theological Seminary had asked him if he would accept a position on the faculty of the Seminary. Initially, Dr. Rowell refused the position, believing that his work in Central Baptist was still incomplete. By October of that year, however, he informed his congregation of his intention to retire from the pulpit.

⁷⁵ *Gospel Witness*, Vol. 22, No. 12 (July 22, 1943): 2.

⁷⁶ *Temple Tidings*, July 28, 1966.

⁷⁷ Robert Holmes, interview, October 5, 2010.

Pastor Robert Holmes, in his early thirties, succeeded the defender of the faith. He began his ministry on January 1, 1960, and one of his first suggestions to the congregation was that Dr. Rowell should be given the title of Pastor Emeritus.⁷⁸ This proposal, not only gave due respect to the founding pastor and recognized his continued ministry among the congregation, but also endeared the young incumbent to both the senior man and the congregation. It was a wise suggestion. Dr. Rowell’s work did not cease at retirement. He spent his time in writing, in his gospel tract ministry, and in lecturing in various colleges, seminaries and conferences in Britain and across North America.

In 1970, at 82 years of age, unable to travel as he had previously, Dr. Rowell again harnessed new technology for the gospel with a telephone ministry. Dial-a-Thought was a recorded one-minute devotional and evangelistic message for those who called the Victoria number.

After a motor accident in March 1972, Dr. Rowell, or “J.B.” as he was affectionately known, began to decline in health. At 84 years, he had outlived all his siblings, despite a life of recurring illness. He had navigated one of the most difficult periods of British and Church history—from the golden years of Victorian England into post-modernity—and had kept the faith, and preserved that faith for a new generation.

Dr. Rowell died on June 24th, 1973. He was 85 years old. His wife Lucy, who was his partner in ministry and with whom he enjoyed a very happy marriage, followed him in death on the 28th of December that same year. They were both buried at the Royal Oak Cemetery in Victoria.

⁷⁸ Robert Holmes, interview, October 5, 2010; and with David F. Holm November 28, 2016.

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Francis Rowell's Diary and a collection of letters pertaining to the Rowells is in the Rowell Archives, McMaster University Archives.