

James Petigru Boyce (1827-1888)

The Forgotten Baptist

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Discovering a new mentor

When Christian conversation comes round to the topic of Systematic and Historical Theology, everybody seems to have a favourite. The first major theological book I ever owned on the subject was Berkof's Systematic Theology given to me by my mother almost forty-five years ago. His Historical Theology soon followed. I then read Sheldon, Fisher, Bicknell, Gibson, Griffith Thomas, Dagg, the Hodges, Bavinck, Dabney, Shedd and others whose names I have long forgotten. I never forgot Berkof and still turn to him regularly for guidance. In recent years, however, he has received some earnest competition.

In 1998, during a visit to a Founders' Conference in Mansfield, Texas, I was given a copy of J. P. Boyce's Abstract of Systematic Theology. When I confessed my ignorance of Boyce to a group of Baptist ministers on the South-Western Baptist Theological Seminary campus, I was told that this was not surprising as even America had forgotten this nineteenth century Baptist theologian and educator. Since then, I have corresponded regularly with Particular Baptist Pastor Jack Armstrong who urged me to write on Boyce. This chapter is therefore my initial findings on the man whose memory was 'lost' to the churches but who is happily now being re-discovered by the Lord's people.

Boyce's pre-conversion life

James Petigru Boyce was born on 11 January, 1827 in Charleston, South Carolina, the son of Ker Boyce and Amanda Jane Caroline. Amanda was the sister of Nancy Johnston of Newberry who had died in 1823 after being married to Ker for six years. The two families were in partnership as traders and James's parents managed their affairs so well that the Boyces became the wealthiest family in the State. Young James's initial education was at Charleston College and he came under the Word of God through the preaching of Presbyterian James Henley Thornwell and Baptist Basil Manly Sr.. Though Amanda and her husband were Presbyterians, she was converted under the preaching of Basil Manly, and baptised by him in 1830. James thus grew up with a Baptist-Presbyterian background. In his late teens, he decided to make his spiritual home with the Presbyterians which had, at first, nothing to do with the denomination, but with the charms of a young lady who worshipped at Thornwell's church. Once

fifteen-year-old James heard Thornwell preach, he quite forgot the girl and fell in love with the gospel.

At school, Boyce was a notorious prankster. Once the Headmaster saw Boyce hiding behind a tree and said to the colleagues with whom he was walking, \"There is Boyce, who will be a great man if he does not become a devil!\" Boyce's young life was no bed of roses as his mother died when he was only ten years old, her last wish being that James should take on the responsibility of caring for his four younger brothers and sisters. After Charleston, James entered Brown University and came under the ministry of Francis Wayland and Robert Fuller, under which he was converted. During the 1846 Spring break, Boyce shut himself in his cabin throughout the ship's slow journey from New York to Charleston in order to pray and read his Bible. When he reached home, he presented himself to visiting speaker Robert Fuller and Pastor N. M. Crawford for baptism.

His marriage, graduation and call to the ministry

Back at college, Boyce joined a local Baptist church, commenced witnessing to his fellow students, especially the Unitarians, and taught Sunday School. His earlier correspondence mentions the low spiritual state at Brown but in 1847, he reported a number of conversions and a general interest in spiritual matters. Revival came to Brown and Boyce was obviously at the heart of it. Through his room-mate, Milton Roberts, he was introduced to Lizzie Llewellyn Ficklen, of Welsh extraction, with whom he fell in love on the spot and to whom he proposed in a matter of hours. Lizzie, however, refused to fall in with such instant plans but over the months, the spiritual-minded young lady realised that she was designed for Boyce and finally accepted his proposals of marriage which took place at Washington, Georgia, on 20 December, 1848.

Boyce graduated in 1847 and had earnest thoughts of becoming a minister. At first, his father objected, believing James should take over the large family business. Boyce thus assisted his father for a while but also edited the Southern Baptist, ran a Christian book store and engaged in private study. Ker eventually consented to James becoming a minister but doctors now warned Boyce that his eyesight was failing rapidly and further study could leave him blind. He thus spent months of agony, wondering just where the Lord was leading him.

A Baptist at Presbyterian Princeton

As by a miracle, Boyce's eyesight improved and he prayed concerning Baptist Hamilton College and Presbyterian Princeton as venues for further study. Princeton won, and Boyce matriculated in 1849, now twenty-two years of age. The deciding factor was not his denominational preferences but Princeton's fine library which gave greater opportunities for research.

Princeton, in those days boasted a mere 136 students, yet the college had

already gained a high reputation for academic and spiritual education. This was chiefly due to the Alexanders and the Hodges. At Princeton, Boyce found ideal lodgings for himself and his wife, and was thrilled with the lectures of Charles Hodge on Systematic Theology and used Hodge's system on becoming a tutor at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. This work obviously influenced Boyce greatly in planning his Abstract. The works of Francis Turretin also tutored Boyce in the doctrines of grace during this period. Baptist John A. Broadus in his definitive biography of Boyce, describes in great detail, and with obvious approval, the great work done at Princeton at the time of Boyce's studies there. In later years, both Boyce and Broadus exchanged pulpits with sound Presbyterians and invited them to lecture to their students. Boyce gave himself two years to complete the Princeton syllabus, hoping to do the second and third year in one year. This did not work out and Boyce seems to have either overestimated his own abilities or the college possibilities. He thus left Princeton without completing the course of studies.

Affluent Boyce becomes a poor man's pastor

Another reason for Boyce's leaving Princeton was that since being licenced in 1847, he had preached regularly, (especially at Penn's Neck, not far from Princeton), and believed that he could wait no longer before entering the preaching and teaching ministry. Speaking of Boyce's preaching whilst at Princeton, C. W. Hodge relates what a 'high reputation for eloquence and strength in the pulpit' his friend had and how he was in great demand as a preacher in a wide area. In July, 1851, Boyce received a call to the Baptist Church in Columbia, South Carolina. He accepted it and commenced his ministry there on 1 October.

Columbia was a tiny but very prosperous town of seven thousand inhabitants, graced with those beautiful, columned land-houses associated with the pre-civil war period which cost \$30-60,000 even in those days. A military academy, the South Carolina College (where Thornwell taught) and a thriving Presbyterian Theological Seminary added to the status of the town. Of the Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Methodist and Baptist churches, the Baptist membership was the smallest and the poorest. The former pastor had not been able to live on the meagre salary. Boyce, born with a silver spoon in his mouth, did not have to burden the church in this way, though many wondered how a rich and privileged person would manage in the most lowly population in Columbia, a large percentage of whom were of African origin. Nothing daunted, Boyce threw himself into the work and soon the church was reaping blessings. Boyce was able to continue his theological studies due to the fine Presbyterian libraries in the town. The once tiny congregation outgrew their chapel within a year and Boyce was given three months leave to canvass around the State for funds for a larger building. Meanwhile, tired of lodgings, the Boyces built their own house and James was able to make a short trip to Brown University to be awarded his A.M.. The church continued to prosper but in 1854, Ker Boyce died and James was appointed legatee and business heir. Ker's business connections

were highly intricate, so Boyce had to take leave of absence for six months to settle his father's affairs. Boyce continued to run the family business throughout his ministry and teaching career.

From Pastor to Moderator and Professor

At twenty-seven years of age, Boyce was voted Moderator of the Charleston Baptist Association and, at this time, he deepened his friendship with Dr Thornwell. Either because of the burden of the businesses and farmlands he had inherited or the strong feeling that he must enter the teaching ministry, or because of the fact that he was given arduous duties by the Convention, Boyce handed in his resignation as pastor in the Spring of 1855, and entered into negotiations with Furman University, Greenville for a professorship. This was a troubled time for America's Baptists. The Foreign Mission Board was suspected of questionable practices, the Southern Baptists separated from their Northern brethren and the new denomination of Old Landmarkers refused to recognise non-Baptist ministers as called of God. This was hard for Boyce who shared fellowship with many ministers of other denominations and had a deep interest in foreign missions. In June of that year, Professor Mims of Furman died at the early age of thirty-eight and the trustees asked Boyce to take over his chair. Boyce accepted, though Furman was going through a difficult period with only four theology students and few in the other departments. Boyce refused a salary until the university gained a better footing. The news that Boyce was a gifted business man, and prepared to work hard for no salary, soon spread and institution after institution invited him to give gratuitous instruction. Though Boyce was very popular with the students and drew them in like a magnet draws iron, the university soon suspended him from duties so that he could work as a Professor-at-Large and raise money for the theology department.

The seeds for a greater work sown

The inaugural address of the twenty-nine year old professor outlining the need for more pastors and evangelists, and the principle and aims of theological training has not lost its force and applicability today. Indeed, it has been described by many educational experts as 'epoch-making'. Speaking on Three Changes in Theological Institutions, Boyce outlined that Baptist seminaries for pastoral training should be open to all, irrespective of their education and background and different courses should be planned according to the students' callings and abilities. Those students who showed great academic prowess should not be sent abroad for their further education, but Baptist Training Colleges should provide tuition for them up to the highest level. An Abstract of Principles should be drawn up and signed by all Baptist lecturers to guard against erroneous teaching and thus the break up of the unity of faith in Baptist establishments and churches. The fervour, pathos, spirituality and experimental religion shown in Boyce's address cannot be presented in a summarised form. The ears and hearts of his hearers were riveted to attention as he preached, rather

than lectured:

Oh, were there ever a time when we should expect that God would answer the prayers of his churches, and overflow the land and the world with a ministry adequate to uphold his cause in every locality, it would seem to be now!—now, when the wealth of the churches is sufficient to send the Gospel to every creature; now, when in the art of printing the Church has again received the gift of tongues; now, when the workings of God himself indicate his readiness to beget a nation in a day; now, when the multiplication a thousand-fold of the laborers will still leave an abundant work for each; but now, alas! now, when our churches at home are not adequately supplied, when dark and destitute places are found in the most favored portions of our own land, when the heathen are at our very doors, and the cry is, ‘Help! Help!’ and there is no help, because there are not laborers enough to meet the wants immediately around us.

Many Baptists deplored the low educational state of the churches and ideas had been expressed to form a single, central university to draw men called to the ministry from all the southern states. At this time, there were only thirty students in training at a dozen different colleges, all keeping up full, expensive staffs. Boyce had supported the idea of a central training body from his early twenties, writing on it whilst editing the Southern Baptist. He believed this would also help preserve the unity of the churches. When such Baptist stalwarts as W. B. Johnson, R. B. C. Howell and especially Virginian J. B. Jeter read Boyce’s plan for a Baptist Seminary, they realised that this address could provide a nucleus on which to base The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBs always emphasis the article with capitalisation and stress). Boyce immediately offered his full cooperation, suggesting Furman as the initial seat of the joint enterprise. A planning committee was organised under the presidency of B. Manly Sr consisting of Boyce, J. A. Broadus, B. Manly Jr, E. T. Winkler and William Williams. Such a plan, they estimated, would cost \$100,000 to realise. Naturally, Boyce was given the task of raising the money. The financial genius dashed backwards and forwards throughout South Carolina in his two-horsed carriage, canvassing, investing, and promoting and, as everybody expected, he raised the capital within a year and lectures started in 1859. The Seminary was provided with eight departments: 1. Bible Introduction. 2. O.T. Interpretation including Semitic Studies. 3. N.T. Studies including Greek. The English Bible was also carefully studied in these departments. 4. Systematic Theology (under Boyce), including Latin texts. 5. Polemic Theology and Apologetics. 6. Homiletics. 7. Church History and 8. Church Government and Pastoral Duties. Four professors were initially appointed.

The Civil War and its Aftermath

Sadly the Civil War broke out and the young Seminary was reduced to chaos as young men turned up for lectures as there were lulls in the fighting. Boyce, an anti-secessionist, who refused to introduce politics into

Christian training, had a hard time of it. He foresaw that the war would be long and bloody and bought in huge supplies of food and equipment for the college. Much of his own financing was tied up in his New York businesses which he lost in the war. His own house was attacked and plundered by Union Troops who held him at gun point for hours. His calm demeanour and the gracious way in which he addressed the uniformed bandits, by God's grace, made it impossible for them to shoot him. Boyce was now often called away from his lecturing duties to preach to the Confederate army and the South Carolina Governor A. G. Magrath made him aide-de-camp, awarding him the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. Soon he was made a Council of State member and leading authority in managing the State's finances. In all these turbulent times, Boyce kept the Seminary free of debt, though its buildings were razed to the ground by military action.

In 1865 Seminary work began anew but Boyce's personal fortune was greatly reduced. He canvassed amongst people who now had little money and yet managed to collect \$3,000. Boyce was offered enormous wages by business companies and State institutions who wished to benefit from his skills. He became the most sought after man in the State and was pressed to represent South Carolina in Congress. Boyce answered 'No' to all these pleas. God had given him The Seminary to look after, and look after it he would!

New growth faced with new problems

With students now numbering over sixty, a fifth professorship was founded (Crawford Troy, an O.T. and Oriental Languages expert), and a former hotel, Goodlet House, was purchased as a Hall of Residence. However, the Southern Baptists demanded a more accessible site for the Seminary and promised large sums of money to implement this. Sites in Chattanooga, Memphis, Atlanta, Nashville and Louisville were suggested, the latter being chosen as it was a thriving town with thriving churches and had excellent communication and transport facilities, linking it with all the Southern States.

A further Landmarker controversy arose which was to challenge hitherto practised 'American Baptist Principles' further. The Seminary had been most open in accepting candidates with non-Baptist backgrounds. A good number of these had not received baptism by a Baptist minister and others had received baptism by Baptists whose 'succession and authority' were questioned by the High Church Landmarker lobbyists. Both Prof. Williams and Prof. Boyce came under strong criticism. Instead of emphasising the unity of belief with fellow Baptists and the Reformed and Protestant churches, the parol became, \"Let's mark out certain Baptists as a totally separate people!\" A temporary calm in this storm was gained by Williams and Boyce taking on subjects which did not deal with church order. These controversies were hard on a man who had given his all for the Seminary, even to paying his fellow professors' wages himself. Indeed, after the War,

Boyce had to pledge his remaining property for a loan so that he could finance the Seminary. Apparently both the staff and the Baptist churches thought that the denomination was funding the entire work. Boyce was now in very poor health and had to walk with the aid of a stick because of his severe gout, caught by roughing-it with the troops. He was also dejected at seeing his beloved Baptists not only separating themselves from Christians in general but splitting up amongst themselves due to their varying views on politics and church order.

Fame comes to The Seminary and to Boyce

Once the Seminary moved to Louisville in 1877, progress was made in all areas. The students now numbered over ninety and the Seminary facilities were widened by the libraries and other public institutions in the town. Furman had only drawn students from the Atlantic Coast area but now they came from all the Southern States. There was also strong local support from the various denominations. Boyce had gained a reputation of being a brother who opened his heart to all who loved the gospel and the old, bad image of the Baptists as a bigoted sect gradually disappeared. Through Boyce, they had become respectable, but not at the cost of a solid trust in Christ and a love for God's word. Their educational achievements were now recognised by the general public. The Baptist Press also came to the Seminary's assistance and such newspapers as the Western Recorder, even published Boyce's lectures.

Boyce now, once again, took up Systematic Theology and began to work on his major publication Abstract of Systematic Theology, originally given in lecture form and not published until 1887. Starting with a definition of theology and an outline of its scope, Boyce continued with the Being of God, Creation, the Fall. He then proceeds to the Person and Offices of Christ, outlining the work of the Atonement in its reference to Election, Reprobation, Effectual Calling, Regeneration and Conversion, Repentance, Faith, Justification, Adoption and Sanctification, ending with the Final Perseverance of the Saints, the Second Coming and the Final State of the Righteous and the Wicked. In his most detailed examination of the Atonement, Boyce rejects the universal Mediator theory and all those which ignore the sinfulness of sin, penal, vicarious substitution and imputed righteousness. Boyce combated especially Andrew Fuller's views which saw the Atonement as being for the generality of man but limited in its application through the reception of the believer. Boyce argues that this error separates Redemption and Reconciliation from Atonement and makes them mere outcomes of acceptance and not of God's sovereign will and elective plan. It is thus no different from the general or universal atonement theory. For Boyce, Christ's Atonement is for God's elect and for them only. This doctrine, he affirms, has always been the doctrine of the Regular (Particular) Baptists.

Boyce's life draws to an end but his legacy is kept alive

From 1877 to 1887 Boyce remained at the height of his career, renowned far beyond the Southern States and the Union for his strong Christian witness and his marvellous teaching methods. Sadly Higher Criticism crept into the Seminary and Boyce was hard put to remove it. Many new students came as rank Arminians which made Boyce despair at the state of the churches. Most students, however, left the Seminary as Calvinists and as men who praised God all their lives for Boyce's sound teaching and pastoral heart. Around 1887 Boyce's strength began to wane. He had worked unceasingly for the gospel and for the Southern Baptists for nigh on forty years, sixteen of them plagued with the excruciating pains of gout. Still he began his working day at 5:00 am and had hardly a break until 11:00 pm. In May, 1887, Boyce confessed that he could not keep up the pace and asked for an assistant who was provided in the person of F. H. Kerfoot. He remained calmly trusting in God, though great bouts of pain and dizziness often came over him. He was sent on a European tour to regain strength and was delighted to attend Spurgeon's Tabernacle but found the great Baptist preacher also an invalid. Boyce felt much at home in England, saying that it was exactly like South Carolina. Whilst in England, Boyce became sick with dropsy and kidney trouble and wrote to tell the Seminary that he was too ill to travel home and they should elect a substitute for him as he would never be able to teach at the Seminary again. Boyce moved to Paris for the winter but he was now dying. Boyce became delirious in his last few days, talking incoherently about the Seminary. After a long period of unconsciousness, he could no longer speak as his tongue was so swollen. There were sadly no last words for Boyce's sorrowing family and posterity to treasure. He was unconscious throughout his final day and died on Friday 28 December, 1888.

James P. Boyce had the makings of a great financier, business tycoon and leading politician. He had the organising talent and the charisma of any world leader. He chose, however, a simpler life, devoted to the education of the young and the sending out of ambassadors for Christ. He chose the 'one thing needed' to be truly great, he chose to be a servant to all, that he might win some to Christ. In this task, few were as successful as Boyce. The Southern States, the Baptist Churches, indeed, Christians everywhere will find in the life and works of this great man of God, teaching that will lead and strengthen them all along the way to joining him in Glory.

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