

Bunyan in Brisbane!

‘The Love of Christ Constraineth’

A short life of Henry George Cray 1835-1902

by David Parker

(With thanks for help with some family history to Eric Kopittke and to Rod Kirkpatrick for help with press history.)

Background

The early Baptists in Brisbane benefited from a highly dedicated member who had been brought up in a church connected with the author of the iconic book, ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’, John Bunyan. He also had been a member of one of the leading Baptist churches in the city of London. These early influences enabled him to contribute to the ministry of his church and the denomination as a whole in very significant way. This man was Henry George Cray who was a deacon and secretary of the City Tabernacle Baptist Church and a president of the Baptist Union, and its first secretary.

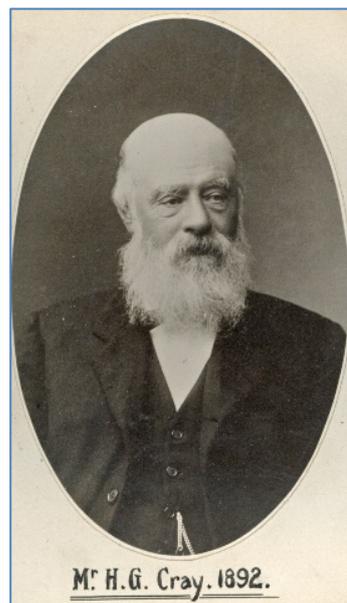


Fig 1. Official Baptist Union Presidential Portrait

Life

Cray was born in Southampton, England on 8 August 1835 and was educated in London. At about the age of 18, he took up an apprenticeship in printing at Bedford under a Christian master, and joined the Bunyan Meeting House. In this fellowship, which dates back to 1650, he would have become fully acquainted with the story of the founder of the church and the calling to the Christian believer to a life of discipleship and pilgrimage whatever cost that might entail. The church building, the third on the site, (pictured) was opened in 1849, just a few years before Cray arrived. (The 350th anniversary of the first building is being celebrated now in 2022!)

In 1857, Cray returned to London where he attended the famous Bloomsbury Chapel and was baptised by the outstanding founding pastor, Dr William Brock. The building, erected in 1848, the first ever to be erected on a London street as a 'purpose-built' church (in contrast with meeting places in obscure places due to decades-old social and legal restrictions), was the creation of Sir Samuel Morton Peto, who made his wealth through building railways and other great projects. The building featured two tall spires decorating a massive edifice including a prominent rose window (the spires have gone but the massive towers remain) in a mixture of Italian and English Gothic style. Peto invited William Brock to be the preacher and he quickly established a reputation for progressive ministry in the area and beyond, with the church becoming recognised as the central Baptist church of London. By the time Cray was a member there, the membership was around 900.

Cray arrived in Brisbane on 18 Sept 1863 and found a position with the *Guardian* newspaper. This paper appeared first on 31 March 1860 and ceased publication on 30 June 1868 when it merged with the *Brisbane Courier*. Then in 1866 Cray joined the Queensland Government Printing Office at first in a casual position as a compositor.

In 1876 he was appointed to a permanent position, and in December 1884, he took on an administrative role as a financial manager, in a position known as 'computer'!. He held this position for the rest of his life. He was therefore another one of a number of early Queensland Baptists who were part of the printing and publishing industry, including James Swan (the first known Baptist in the colony), W H Buzacott, C H Buzacott, and T B Stephens, amongst others. (See *The Queensland Baptist Forum* No 110, Dec 2021: Pulpit and Press by Rod Kirkpatrick). A fellow-Printing Office employee, Septimus Price (1836-1902), was also a leading figure at the Wharf Street church for almost the same period of time as Cray.



Fig 2. Bunyan Meeting House, Bedford, UK

Wharf Street Baptist Church

Upon arriving in Brisbane, Cray lost no time in associating himself with the Baptist cause. He was not of the Particular Baptist persuasion which was represented in Brisbane by the Jireh church in Fortitude Valley, so he began attending the Wharf Street (later City Tabernacle) Baptist Church, the only other alternative. However, this was a period when the Wharf Street church was undergoing severe difficulties. Cray found the first service he attended depressing, with a congregation of only about 50 (partially due, he realised, to the bad weather on the day). Although accustomed to attendance at a very large and crowded church, he persisted, and soon was able to make a highly significant contribution to the church and over the years, proved to be a worthy and valuable member.

He quickly became involved in lay preaching, serving not only the main church, but also the various outstations and preaching places established by the energetic pastor of the church, Rev B G Wilson, including Oxley, Enoggera, Bulimba, Sandgate and Gregory Terrace. He also preached at Hendra (now Clayfield) and had a hand in selecting a building site for the fellowship, thus proving to more than just a 'fly in – fly out' visiting preacher.

Cray was also a devoted, effective long-serving Sunday School teacher, being responsible for guiding generations of young people in the faith. In 1869, he was, with other Baptist leaders, one of the people who established the Brisbane Sunday School Union (whose constitution he wrote). He was a strong advocate of effective teacher training, a new and growing area of ministry at the time (*The Queensland Baptist* 30/4/70). When Christian Endeavour was introduced in the 1880s, he also became a strong supporter of this movement, both at his own church and across the city. He was dedicated to training of leaders of these organisations, often contributing articles on the topic to *The Queensland Baptist* newspaper, and participating in training conferences, typically setting the lead in organising them. He continued in both these ministries, as well as the Temperance movement and lay preaching to an advanced age. He was also known for his knowledge of English writing, and poetry, producing some verse himself and occasionally lecturing on the subject.

Cray was appointed a deacon of the church in 1869 and soon took up the office of secretary (1870), a position he held (with only a short break 1875-78) until 1899, serving almost 27 years in the position. He resigned from the diaconate shortly after, for health reasons.

He was a reliable and efficient officer of the church, being involved necessarily in all its main activities. He was also one of the trustees of the church. As senior deacon, he took the lead in church affairs, acting as its spokesperson and often standing in for the pastor in organisational matters, formal occasions and in the pulpit. One of the most touching of these occasions was the funeral in 1893 of the young daughter of the pastor, Rev William Whale, and another was the official farewell to Thomas Spurgeon, son of the great English Baptist preacher, who had been conducting evangelistic services in the country.

Cray was part of all the major developments in the life of the church, including the call and appointment of pastors (Rev Henry Coombs in 1879 and Rev William Whale in 1885, and the enlargement and replacement of the church buildings—especially the sale of the Wharf Street property and the opening of the City Tabernacle in Wickham Terrace in 1890. He was also one of the senior church representatives when outstations of the church at Sandgate, Taringa and Enoggera were constituted as churches. There were also some legal issues facing the church which necessitated the attention of the Secretary along with other officers and members.

His early grounding at Bedford and London and his years of experience in Brisbane meant that he could be relied on for faithful support and for wise opinions. For example, when the question arose in the City Tabernacle of whether there should be elders as well as deacons, he wrote a compact but wide-ranging article (*The Queensland Baptist* September 1901 p 94) which set out a mature, biblical and practical view of the church, its purpose, membership and ministry. He emphasised the importance of personal faith and the role of the membership in the church but also the value of full-time trained pastors to 'promote the edification of the church'. However, he was also quick to point out that 'such training gives no warrant for the formation of priestly class, from which such evils have arisen.' He also noted the role of deacons to look after the temporal affairs of the church and of the pastor, and of elders to 'undertake the oversight of the church, comforting the weak, and watching over the wanderers.' He added, 'In modern practice, this is left almost entirely to the pastor, but it is questionable whether the loss is not greater than the gain. It certainly tends to the idea, so common in many minds, that the minister is a superior being to ordinary mortals.' Realistically, however, he recognized that 'in practice the duties of elder and deacon are usually amalgamated.'

Overall, it was said of Cray that throughout his involvement with the church he exhibited 'zeal and well-tempered discretion' and that he was characterised by 'plodding perseverance'. His involvement in the difficult early days, along with one or two others, was crucial for the church's survival.



Fig 3. Wharf Street Baptist Church, 1859

Baptist Union

Cray's influence and contribution to Baptist life went much beyond his local fellowship. Given his broad churchmanship, it was not surprising that, as secretary of the original church in Brisbane, he was one of the forces behind the formation of the Baptist Association (Union) of Queensland in 1877. In fact, he drew up the initial constitution and was appointed its first secretary, a position he held until 1882 when pressure of work became too much for him. As such he saw the slow but steady growth of the denomination as it later expanded to embrace overseas and home missions and many other functions in the years following. In addition, he had a hand in the establishment of the denominational newspaper, *The Queensland Baptist*, and was its business manager for many years, as well as contributing content.

His service for the Baptist denomination was typically efficient and unobtrusive. Even after the conclusion of his term as secretary, he continued to be involved on its committees and was a keen supporter of denominational activities, often contributing financially to church planting efforts and other endeavours, including overseas missions. Another one of his interests was the Hospital Sunday Fund committee on which he served in his senior years.

It was not surprising then that he was appointed to the denomination's highest honour, the presidency, in 1892. He was one of the few laymen to be so honoured up to that time, and took as the topic of his presidential address, 'The Christian Layman' - then not as a common topic as it became later. Speaking from a wealth of experience, now as a senior public servant, he outlined in deceptively simple words, his powerful and strongly biblical views on the role of the lay-person in relationships with God, the church, society, and the state, showing a depth of devotion, understanding and commitment that evoked sincere praise from his audience. One respondent said the address portrayed 'the ideal' which many of his fellow Baptists had been 'striving after for years'. Another, rather patronisingly said that the 'address amply justified the committee placing a layman in the chair.' (*The Queensland Baptist* Nov 1892)

Appreciation

Although never seeking attention, Cray's dedicated service did not go unappreciated. When he retired from his position as secretary of the Baptist Association in 1882, he was given a vote of thanks and an illuminated address. But a few months later in July 1883, when his church honoured him with a presentation of purse of sovereigns, worth £55/10/-, the Baptist Association, believing it had not done enough, joined in the celebration with a further gift of £20/4/-.

Then in 1886, when he resigned from Sunday School teaching, he was presented with an album of photographs of the church and an engraved plate. Then again, at the church anniversary in September 1887, he was presented with another purse of 65 sovereigns.

Finally, again, in February 1900, when he retired as secretary after more than 25 years of 'diligent, faith service', a special gathering was held by the church in his honour, when he was presented with a purse of 39 sovereigns, and an album of photographs pastors and officers of the church and its buildings. Mr Cray 'had much to relate of bygone days' and 'seemed to be much touched, and keenly felt his position in laying down the reins of office.'

Family

His family is hardly mentioned in church or denominational documents, but other records indicate that he was married twice. The first time was in London when aged 27, not long before he left for Australia, to Emma Jane Rich who died in Brisbane on 16 April 1865. On 23 Oct 1873, he married Matilda Louisa Taylor (nee Hancock) born 28 Dec 1849, widow of Richard Taylor (deceased 10 Mar 1872). There were three children, Clarence Holberton, born 29 Nov 1874, Oswald Pain, born 21 May 1877, and Ethel Best born 13 Mar 1880.

Oswald, educated at the Leichhardt Street school (now Central) and at Brisbane Grammar School, became a pharmacist. He married Ethel May Dennis on 2 July 1902 at the City Tabernacle with Rev William Whale officiating. He was mentioned as a member of the Wharf Street Baptist church and for a short while in the 1890s was listed as resident in Ipswich.

The family lived at Jeays Street, Bowen Hills. Matilda, who was also a member of the City Tabernacle, moved to O'Connelltown (near the Royal Brisbane Hospital) after the death of her husband, where she lived quietly apart from an incident in 1908 when she was disturbed by an drunken intruder. She died on 19 December 1916 and was buried with her late husband at the Toowong Cemetery.

Senior Years and Death

Cray continued his busy pace for many years, serving his church and the wider Baptist community almost to his last days. Even after resigning from his organisational positions, he still carried out other activities, including lay preaching, and he continued his support for causes such as missions, the Sunday School Union, Christian Endeavour and the Temperance movement.

In 1899, there was a Royal Commission into the operation of Queensland Government Printing Office, at which Cray gave evidence. It seems that it was under heavy pressure and was failing badly in production targets. It was readily acknowledged that the organisation (and Cray as a senior officer) could not have been expected to produce the required results due to the amount of orders, the antiquated equipment and the administrative and financial systems in place. A long list of 37 recommendations was produced to remedy the situation, which included new machinery, better financial control, improved employment arrangements and more efficient workflow practices.

Cray had experienced a few occasions of ill-health in his early 60s, but soon recovered. However, his last year or so of life was spent in considerable pain. Late in 1901 he went on sick leave from the Printing Office after 36 years' service, and underwent serious surgery by G Herbert Hopkins, the most senior doctor in the field, to treat cystitis nephritis.

