

CHARLES BENSON BARNETT

“The Word is with us the ultimate and infallible authority for guidance in all conduct and belief. We hold to the whole Word of God . . . our Lord’s Word is plain and insistent, ‘Go ye into all the world’ and we desire that as far as possible our hands shall be pure from the blood of all men.” C. Benson Barnett, *Annual Report*, 1916 (Brammall, 2016, p.52)



Charles Benson Barnett was born on 4 December, 1869, at Port Cygnet, Tasmania (Australia), a small township on the Huon River. He was commonly known as Benson.

His grandparents, William and Martha Barnett and their four children, arrived in Tasmania in 1833 as pioneer settlers. Although never ordained, William was soon officiating as a preacher, pastor and missionary; while he was a staunch Congregationalist, he also worked well with other independent churches.

Benson’s parents, Henry and Rebecca Barnett (nee Cane), were members of the Davey Street Congregational Church, Hobart, where Benson attended Sunday School. He was the fifth of ten children, but not all survived childhood. He excelled academically, winning scholarships to enable him to complete his education, and graduated as dux of Christ’s College in 1888 with an Associate of Arts degree (2nd Class honours). He was also a very keen and accomplished sportsman and during his final year at Christ’s College, where he was school captain, he “excelled in athletics, cricket and Australian football, being captain of both the cricket and football teams.” (ibid. p.13) As a young man, he was actively involved in the ministries of the Davey Street Congregational Church, the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and the Christian Endeavour Union where he represented his church. These three bodies “were to become his keen supporters in prayer and finance during his missionary service with the China Inland Mission (CIM).” (ibid. p.14)

Benson’s interest in China commenced during his high school days and “as early as 1887, he gave an interesting and well-received paper at the YMCA’s gospel temperance meeting, on ‘The Chinese: Their Manners and Customs.’” (ibid. p.14) In 1890, Hudson Taylor, the founder of CIM, toured Australia to provide information about his work and to recruit missionaries for cross-cultural Gospel ministry. Twenty-year-old Benson Barnett, recently graduated from university, attended Taylor’s meetings on 19 and 20 September, and “was immediately confirmed in his thinking that God was directing him to China.” (ibid. p.15)

About the beginning of 1893 he enrolled in Hope Lodge at Belair in the Adelaide Hills (which was renamed Angas Missionary Training College in 1898) for theological and cross-cultural missionary training. He developed a firm friendship with the Principal, Lockhart Morton, “and Barnett was later to emulate many of Lockhart Morton’s principles for his college: interdenominational training, pre-eminence given to the Bible, rigorous preparation for cross-cultural work, serious commitment to prayer, wide-ranging practical ministry components, and unbending faith in God’s financial provision, without soliciting support from others.” (ibid. p.16)

On completion of his training, Benson headed to China, where he served with CIM from late 1894 to 1907. While there, he was ordained as a Congregational minister in the London Missionary Society (LMS) Chapel, Shanghai, in October, 1899. His missionary service encompassed the first Sino-Japanese War and the perilous time of the Boxer Rebellion (1900-1901), when 239 Christian missionaries (79 from CIM) and tens-of-thousands of Chinese Christians were martyred. During the latter, he remained in inland China, and with other young CIM men, helped rescue many missionaries from the hands of the rebels.



Charles Benson Barnett married Elizabeth Irvine Ferguson on 4 October, 1900, at the Seaman's Chapel in Yokohama, Japan. They had met in 1899 when she arrived in China following her missionary training in Adelaide. After their engagement, they were separated due to the Boxer Rebellion but were eventually reunited in Shanghai; Elizabeth had been moved there with others for their safety.

During his years in China, in addition to his excellent linguistic skills and effective Bible teaching ministry, Benson also developed medical and dentistry skills. He administered basic medical help and carried homeopathic remedies (and the good news of Jesus Christ) with him. He taught himself to extract abscessed teeth without the use of anaesthetic; this treatment was in high demand and he was often preferred to the overseas dentist working in the area. His medical ministry included significant work with opium addicts, who came to him to break their habit, and he offered "basic medical help to those suffering from malaria and various other febrile diseases . . . Evangelism, however, was always an inseparable part of the therapeutic relationships he fostered." (ibid. p.27)

Benson and Elizabeth eventually returned to Australia with their children, Rita and Allan, in May, 1907, and reluctantly resigned as CIM missionaries. Elizabeth's health had deteriorated significantly after Allan's birth due to 'tropical sprue,' an intestinal inflammatory disease. Benson pastored Congregational Churches in Launceston, Latrobe, Don and Forth, Tasmania, and Brunswick in Melbourne, Victoria (from June, 1910). "The picture of Barnett's four years at Brunswick is that of an energetic evangelist, a preacher, a community activist and a supporter and strategist of overseas missions." (ibid. p.30) He served on the councils of CIM and LMS, and represented the Congregational Churches on the Victorian Alliance, a temperance and prohibitionist society. He also lobbied against increased gambling in the Brunswick area.

In 1915, he became the Assistant Director and subsequently, Acting Principal of Angas Missionary Training College, Adelaide. But despite his commitment, enrolments fell during that year due to World War 1 and before the year was out, the main college premises were requisitioned by the government to serve as an Infectious Diseases Hospital. During his time at the college, he frequently preached in Adelaide Congregational Churches and "headed up an intentionally interdenominational committee to start planning meetings for the deepening of the spiritual life, which resulted in the first Keswick Convention in Adelaide in September, 1915." (ibid. p.32)

Barnett received several calls to return to pastoral ministry, but was convinced of the need to establish a Bible and missionary training college in the Eastern states, specifically in Sydney.

With very little money and none to achieve this goal, he moved to Sydney with his family in January, 1916, where they were accommodated in a borrowed house.

By mid-February, 1916, Benson had gathered a group of eight evangelicals who shared his vision, but although his thinking had been confirmed, he had no offers, building or finances. He found a very suitable property for lease in Croydon named 'Ooma,' "a large, elegant house only thirty years old, in good repair, on a substantial piece of land, close to public transport, and available for lease from a deceased estate at a very reasonable price." (ibid. p.45) (£132 per annum) After renting for ten years, the College purchased the property for £2,500.

The new 'Australasian Missionary and Bible College' commenced on 15 April, 1916; later that year, the Board of Reference changed the name to 'The Missionary and Bible College.' It commenced with just two students – Ben Corlett (a New Zealander) and Roy Seaman (from South Australia); five more full-time students began their studies in the second half of the year. Also during April, 1916, Benson Barnett was considered for a call to pastor the Leichhardt Congregational Church. However, Canadian-born Rev. R. Stevenson was preferred, but he notified the church in August that he wouldn't be accepting the position. In September, 1916, Benson was invited to, "look after Leichhardt Congregational Church for the next nine months. He became its interim pastor and preacher, and finished up pastoring the church until 1937 – twenty-one years! Because of his longstanding principled refusal to use public transport on Sundays, a horse and buggy were purchased in February, 1917, to convey him to Leichhardt and to bring visiting lecturers from the railway station. Shortly after, the Board decided to require all the residential students to attend the Sunday evening services with their principal there." (ibid. p.56) The students fondly named him 'The Chief.'

While 1918 saw the end of World War 1, it also ushered in a serious problem for Australian churches and theological colleges. ". . . Benson Barnett was beginning to detect . . . a decreasing respect for biblical authority and a growing movement towards liberalism. This he called the 'dethroning' of the Word of God from its rightful place of pre-eminence. What was beginning to happen in Australia was the local manifestation of the rise of theological liberalism worldwide . . . Most of the mainline Protestant denominations succumbed to it to varying degrees." (ibid. p.66)

Benson and other evangelicals were greatly concerned and he urged the college's supporters to pray for its "witness to the Bible's inspiration, inerrancy, sufficiency and authority." (ibid. p.67) His response included the suggestion of a Bible Convention designed to refute unbiblical, liberal ideas – "small conferences on 'fundamentalism' were held as early as 1921 in Sydney, and 1922 in Melbourne." (ibid. p.67) In 1918, he prepared a 39 page booklet in which he "made an urgent and impassioned plea for Christians, and clergy in particular, to hold the line on the orthodox, biblical tenets of the faith which were fast being eroded by modernism." (ibid. p.67) Published by the college, its title was 'Authority or Anarchy – Which?'

As liberalism wreaked havoc in denominational theological colleges, "Australian evangelicalism in the 1920s and 1930s was in many ways safeguarded by the Bible Colleges; and the long tenure of some of their principals – Barnett (SMBC) and Nash (Melbourne Bible Institute, now MST) each served for over 20 years – ensured consistent protection against anti-evangelical trends. In fact, the young college at Croydon became something of a rallying

point and meeting place for conservative evangelicals, or ‘fundamentalists,’ given a vacuum of leadership from the often suspect theological colleges.” (ibid. p.68)

As the 1930s progressed, Benson Barnett’s health failed. “Thirteen pioneering years in China, followed by several pastorates and almost twenty fruitful but anxious years at the helm of the college as well as pastoring the church at Leichhardt, were beginning to take their toll on the ‘Old Chief.’ Benson and Elizabeth Barnett had poured themselves out unstintingly in loving service and discipleship, and Benson’s health was deteriorating. Exhaustion was to be expected, but now he began developing some early symptoms of a more insidious foe: Parkinson’s disease, with its progressive tremor, shuffling gait, loss of balance, forgetfulness and increasing weakness . . . by 1934, the principal, although only 65 years old, was making heavy weather of his multiple responsibilities. He made it clear that he was physically unable to continue the same volume and pace of work as he had previously.” (ibid. p.93-94)



In 1937, Benson Barnett’s failing health saw him resign from the pastorate at Leichhardt and cease teaching at the college. His illness was so severe that he moved off the campus early in 1938 to receive nursing care. He died in March, 1941, and was buried on 4 April from his beloved Leichhardt Congregational Church.

Despite difficulties at times, the college went from strength to strength with an expanding student body and the purchase of additional properties. In December, 1942, the name was changed to ‘Sydney Missionary and Bible College.’ Over the decades it has continued to grow and maintain its fine evangelical tradition – it is the “oldest interdenominational Bible college in Australia.” (SMBC website, 2016)

Without question, Rev Benson Barnett was a faithful, brave, focussed and determined man who stood as a great example for his students; he continues to be an example for us today. His life in China was not easy – during their years of service, Benson and Elizabeth buried their eight-month-old son, Hal, and they both contracted potentially deadly diseases. We can be inspired by Benson Barnett’s life, for we have the same Gospel, the same Great Commission and the same Head of the Church, our Lord Jesus Christ. The task might seem overwhelming at times, but like Benson, God will equip us for it. As we read in 2 Timothy 1:7, “For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.” (NIV)

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Sydney Missionary and Bible College website: <https://www.smbc.com.au/about/history>

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