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F.F. Bruce: A Life
By Tim Grass
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Frederick Fyvie Bruce (1910-1990) was one of the most influential evangelical biblical scholars of the last half of the Twentieth Century within the UK and the United States at a time when highly respected evangelical academics were rare and almost non-existent. Over his lifetime he wrote over two thousand articles and reviews plus four dozen books, mostly about the Bible, biblical commentary and interpretation, and classical language translation. His approach was nonsectarian and inclusive, from the standpoint of insightful biblical translation rather than systematized theology.

Born in northeastern Scotland, the son of an evangelist, he was raised in the Open Brethren movement, which had adopted a moderate form of Calvinism in which "limited atonement (the doctrine that Christ died for the elect only, and not for all) and double predestination (the idea that God predestined some individuals to be saved, and others to be lost)" (p. 4) was seen to be extreme. Staying a life-long member, Bruce nevertheless developed a number of unusual positions uncommon within the Brethren, but because of his great knowledge and scholarship of classical and Biblical literature as well as his irenic approach to church life and to his non-confrontational manners with people, he flourished as elder and leader in that membership.

Bruce was an excellent student and earned his way through college by winning scholarship competitions called bursaries which gained him much attention and notoriety. Specializing in Greek and Latin at the University of Aberdeen, he earned an MA with first-class honors in language and literature in 1932, followed by another first-class honors graduate degree in Classics at Cambridge. He then studied for a year at the University of Vienna where he did postgraduate work with Paul Kretschmer, a specialist in Indo-European philology, especially the development of the Greek Language, studying Greek and the Hittite Language. He interrupted these doctoral studies by accepting a position at the University of Edinburgh as an Assistant in Greek, which enabled him the opportunity to get his foot on the academic ladder and to get married. Three years later he accepted a position as Lecturer in Greek at the University of Leeds, where he also studied Hebrew along the way.

Bruce wrote voluminously throughout his academic life, a consistent and trained practice that really took off while he taught at Leeds, including his most widely noticed and loved book, *Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?* (1943), later renamed, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (1960), a book voted by *Christianity Today* as one of the top fifty books to have influenced Evangelicals. Along with a growing number of articles that examined the biblical record through classical eyes, it was probably inevitable that his turn towards biblical studies would result in a position in that field. That opportunity came when a position opened in the University of Sheffield's Faculty of Arts as

head of a new department of biblical studies, for which he was accepted. The position was rare since other similar positions at other universities were associated with departments of theology, rather than history and literature. The move fit Bruce perfectly, however, and he developed the program to include not only undergraduate studies but also honors level work and eventually graduate degrees.

Looking at the biblical record from a historical view suited Bruce well not only because of his training but because he always had a distaste for systematized theology, uninterested in discussing the “rules,” far preferring exegesis and examining language and the historical record. Once in his new discipline, Bruce joined the Society for Old Testament Studies in 1947 and the Society for New Testament Studies in 1948, quickly developing a wide network of colleagues and friends, regularly reading papers at their conferences. He soon was being asked to take lecture tours around the world and in 1957 received an honorary DD from Aberdeen, being described as perhaps the “finest scholar that Aberdeen ha[d] produced [in biblical studies] in the last forty years.” Bruce then moved on in 1959 to fill the Rylands Chair in Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at the University of Manchester, a position “which dated back to the founding of the university as an independent institution in 1904” and “did not impose a religious test on its occupant.” (p. 102)

Grass mixes the telling of Bruce’s academic story and many successes with tales of his personal faith and how it worked out with real people, especially with his love for young people and his consistent faithful actions in fulfilling his responsibilities to the church (Brethren assemblies). The thing which struck Grass the most throughout his research for the book was the esteem in which his subject was held by the many who had studied under him, even many years before.

Bruce’s willingness to follow the original languages wherever they led as well as his appreciation of the cultural impact on how the Bible was written attracted a wide range of scholars from varying denominations who wanted to study with him, including students from the Church of the Nazarene, a small denomination in the Wesleyan holiness tradition, e.g., Alex Deasley and Kent Brower. “Doubtless Bruce’s concern for holiness and his familiarity with Methodism in Scotland helped them to sense a kindred spirit, and he had also reviewed kindly a history of the denomination by his friend Jack Ford, *In the Steps of John Wesley*. The Nazarenes warmed to Bruce’s understanding of holiness, and were doubtless influenced by him. He also did much to help the denomination’s college in Manchester, notably in expanding its library, and would become its first Didsbury lecturer in 1978.” (p. 107)

Later in life Bruce spoke at a conference on the topic of women in the church beginning by introducing the idea of cultural relativity treating sections of the Bible as arising from a particular cultural context. Interpreting the Bible within other cultures and centuries later may then involve new approaches. He then contrasted the scribal way of biblical interpretation, which focused on applying laws originally given in another cultural context with the way of Jesus, which involved going back to the purpose of why the laws were originally given, and how that purpose could be fulfilled in a newer changed cultural context. He next asserted that the supposed superiority of man to woman arose only in the context of the Fall and that Christ’s work involved breaking the consequences of the Fall. He completed his argument by surveying the New Testament evidence, arguing for equal roles between the sexes, the linchpin being the principal of equality set out in Galatians 3:28. Therefore any Pauline prohibitions on women related to his cultural contexts and not to the modern world. Bruce particularly found it ironic that so many religious folks wanted to treat Paul, the apostle of liberty, as a lawgiver, and was especially suspicious of any approach which sought to implement binding regulations from New Testament documents. Freedom, he thought, should be a hermeneutical principle: “where there are conflicting practical interpretations of a New Testament text, the interpretation which promotes the

cause of freedom is most likely to be the right one,” but he also realized that the religious mind was overly prone to subject itself to regulations, and therefore the liberating gospel of sovereign grace was too often seen as “too ‘dangerous’ to be allowed unrestrained course.” 192-94

Tim Grass has written a fully realized, in-depth biography of one of the most important evangelical biblical scholars of the twentieth century. Carefully footnoted, covering both Bruce’s academic career and personal life, the book gives a well-balanced view of a kind, considerate and passionate quiet soul serving the Lord where he was planted. The index is helpful, but could be more in depth. End matter also includes a chronology of Bruce’s life and as complete of a bibliography of his works as exists, minus his book reviews, forewords to books by other authors, editorials and published letters which number in the thousands. Those readers not familiar with Scotland and/or the Christian (Plymouth) Brethren movement may have some difficulty in its early chapters, but the warm, insider treatment is very enlightening and the presentation of Bruce’s integration of academe and involved church life is well done and quite engaging. The last chapter offers comments on his legacy and a summary evaluation of Bruce’s academic impact and his personal impact on the church. Sixteen helpful black and white photographs occupy eight pages in the middle of the book. This biography is a must purchase for any library that covers Twentieth Century protestant Christianity. Dr. Frederick Bruce is that big of a name and this book is that good.