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## H.C. Mabie—The Philosophical Personal Worker

by Faris Daniel Whitesell

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One of H.C. Mabie's first conscious impulses toward missions and soul-winning came when he was a child about four years old, sitting on his mother's lap at a missionary meeting. As the medical missionary from Hawaii made his appeal, and the offering plate came by, Mabie saw his mother slip a prized keepsake gold ring from her finger and drop it into the plate in the place of money. Seeing her wipe the hot tears from her gentle face, he sensed that something significant was going on, and his child heart went with hers in the direction of her gift.

Early in life the anointing of the Spirit for soul-winning was upon him. As a college student he had entered into a deeper Christian experience which illuminated the Scriptures for him, gave him Christian joy, a passion for souls, and added courage to witness for Christ. In the glow of this experience he went home, since an epidemic of smallpox had closed the college temporarily. His pastor saw that the power of God was upon him, so gave him a list of the names of nearly two hundred young people in the town, saying, "There, go and bring them in. Lead them to Christ. That's your work." That is exactly what young Mabie did. He tells it in these words:

Encouraged by such a proposal, I set about it. The first visit I made was characterized by a soul-contest of hours resulting in the conversion of a young woman. That led to another and that to others until an entire Bible class of influential young persons surrendered to Christ. From that the work so spread that ere the summer was over nearly all the persons named in my note-book were converted and added to the several churches of the town. Moreover, all this work was marked by the almost total absence of special preaching, the testimony of new converts to new inquirers instead, seeming to suffice.<sup>1</sup>

Henry Clay Mabie (1847-1918) ranked among the leading American Baptists of his day. Great as a preacher, theologian, writer, and evangelical leader, he was greatest as a missionary statesman and soul-winner.

He was closely associated with most of the spiritual giants of his day—D.L. Moody, R.A. Torrey, G. Campbell Morgan, Salvation Army Commander Booth-Tucker, C.I. Scofield, F.B. Meyer, Henry G. Weston, A.T. Pierson, Len. G. Broughton, George F. Pentecost, Prebendary Webb-Peploe, Dr. Bernardo, J.H. Jowett, Charles M. Alexander, Robert Harkness, A.J. Gordon, and the great missionaries of the world.<sup>2</sup> Into his Northfield, Mass., home these men came as his friends and comrades in service.

We have called Dr. Mabie the philosophical personal worker, not so much because he was a master of philosophy, but his mind had the philosophical bent. He delighted to analyze and to explore underlying causes and motives. He sought to plow fresh furrows in the fields of thought on the atonement of Christ, the meaning of saving faith, and methods of approaching the lost with the saving message.

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<sup>1</sup>Henry C. Mabie, *Method in Soul-Winning* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1906), p. 17.

<sup>2</sup>Names gleaned from Janet Mabie, *Heaven on Earth* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951).

Not only as a pastor of Baptist churches in Rockford, Ill., Oak Park, Ill., Brookline, Mass., Indianapolis, Ind., Belvidere, Ill., and St. Paul, Minn., did he practice personal evangelism and carry on a revivalistic ministry; but as Home Secretary for the Baptist Foreign Missionary Society, he visited the mission fields of the world and found that his principles of personal soul-winning were effective there also.



*Dr. H.C. Mabie and his Deacons of Central Baptist Church in 1895. Pictured are F.L. Darrow, Wm. Hamilton, Jason Hidden, John T. Barnum, T.E. Hughes, Dr. H.C. Mabie, A.C. Robinson and J.B. Crooker.*

Dr. Mabie's major contribution to the literature of personal evangelism is his book, *Method in Soul-Winning*, published by Fleming H. Revell Company in 1906. It sets forth his principles and illustrates them by numerous cases at home and abroad. One layman bought a thousand copies of this book for free distribution to ministerial students. He emphasized various incidents and steps whereby particular individuals were "put on the clue" Christ-ward.

He believed that for successful personal soul-winning we must presuppose certain characteristics in the soul-winner. Winning souls is not a perfunctory undertaking; it presupposes much in the winner. Temperamental gifts are important, but more important is a clear vision of God's face, a first-hand experience of Christ. As a result of his own vitalized Christian experience, already mentioned, his college experienced revival for several years, and in one of the neighboring towns where he was invited to speak "over sixty converts came out in a few days."

The spiritually renewed soul-winner will have a concern for the lost. Mabie states it this way:

Along with our sense of deep blessing from God, when it exists, will spring up also the realization of the soul-poverty of those who are without God, and the corresponding conviction that God waits to enrich and fill such souls if they but once open to Him ...

Often when one is in the right way, a particular soul is laid upon his heart with great weight, until he feels that he cannot be denied his craving for that friend's salvation. Undoubtedly it is the divine Spirit which imposes such burdens, and this is often evidence that the desire so cherished is to be granted.<sup>3</sup>

Illustrating this point from his own experience, he tells how he became burdened for a certain farmer in his native community, and went to see him. He said to the farmer:

<sup>3</sup>*Method in Soul-Winning*, p. 23-24.

“Isaac, so deep is my interest in your salvation that if it were necessary I would crawl on my hands and knees for miles if I could share with you my sense of Christ.”

Said he, “I have no doubt of it: I have known for years how you felt for me. I remember hearing you pray aloud for me years ago as you rode by my place on your pony late in the evening on the way from the church to your father’s house. I was husking corn by the roadside behind the stooks in the moonlight, and you did not know I heard you, but I did.”

“Well,” I said, “that’s true, I have loved your soul all this time, and now I want you to come along.”

“All right,” he said, “I have come; it’s settled now.”<sup>4</sup>

Mabie accompanied the farmer to the house and won the family of five to Christ. From this and other cases, he derived two principles: (1) divine emanations from the worker; (2) God’s Spirit working ahead of the worker preparing the prospect. He says it in these words:

But what impressed me in that case, as in many others in my memory, is that multitudes of people really feel divine emanations from us, if we are in the spirit of love and grace towards them—simply yearning to impart these blessings to them—even though we do not speak a word. When, therefore, the right moment comes for the word to be spoken, we are often surprised to find the work already wrought. The truth is God’s Spirit always goes before us; and if we relied upon that fact more absolutely, we should often find our way prepared, and the saving work done with scarcely a word spoken on our part.<sup>5</sup>

He did not believe in making conversion too easy, but rather in demanding large things, ideally high things, such as shocked his fellows into attention and thoughtfulness. He said that the soul-winner “must cherish higher possibilities for unregenerate souls than they begin to think he cherishes: vastly higher than they cherish for themselves. They need to be waked up and shaken out of their own low self-estimates by some spiritual idealism which begins to rate them and their capabilities as God does.”<sup>6</sup> As the imagination sees the lofty potential of souls redeemed through Christ, zeal for their salvation will be quickened.

The evangelizing message was of utmost significance to Dr. Mabie. The death of Christ was central and basic. He named his theory of the atonement the *vicario-vital*: it is both substitutionary and life-giving. He wrote three books on this subject: *The Meaning and Message of the Cross*, 1906; *How Does the Death of Christ Save Us?* 1908; and, *The Divine Reason of the Cross*, 1911.

He sought to offset two inadequate views of the death of Christ: the subjectivism of Albrecht Ritschl, which did away with the objectiveness of the redeeming work of Christ, and, on the other hand, the mechanical views of substitution held by many. He wrote:

The difficulty in the case is to show the ethical energy resident in Christ’s death as it takes effect upon us: to show how the work accomplished in the death of Christ is so related to sin—to our sin—as to become effective to our salvation: so as to engender motive and impart dynamic to ultimate holiness of life.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>ibid., p. 25.

<sup>5</sup>ibid., p. 26.

<sup>6</sup>ibid., p. 29.

<sup>7</sup>Henry C. Mabie, *How Does the Death of Christ Save Us?* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908), p. 3.

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He taught an objective, historical atonement. Christ's death was voluntary, and the atonement was not in the physical pains of crucifixion. He claims:

It was a death which was enacted, or came to its climax, behind the crucifixion, though simultaneously with it. It was a dying which none of the crucifiers saw, or could see, for it was infinitely deeper than their gaze. It could be appreciated only in the heavenlies; even the angels cannot sound it. It was an event which the contemplation of the redeemed in eternity will never exhaust.<sup>8</sup>

Christ's death was more than physical. He writes:

... the tasting of spiritual woe was at the very heart of it. There was a curse in it, and God-in-Christ—in some dreadful way entered the atmosphere of that curse and died of it ... There was, of course, no sin in him to deserve the least he suffered, much less the worst. But by the depth of his knowledge, the fulness of his sympathy, and the largeness, of his capacity of self-humiliation, he grasped and endured in kind everything denoted by death—death of the body, death of the soul, and death of the spirit. He was in some mysterious but real way "made sin on our behalf" (2 Cor. 5:21). He was not only "a sin-offering." He was that indeed, but more. He became as it were sin itself, treated Himself as if He were sin, and in our sin's stead He died. There was a penal element in it.<sup>9</sup>

To those who objected to the substitutionary theory of the atonement as being too mechanical, and too hard and fast, he wrote:

But the substitution implied is not of the mechanical sort. The substitutional element is there. But there is corporately linked with it a new vital energy working in the soul, making the whole process profoundly ethical. Christ's work is vicarious, not in the sense of providing release from obligation to moral standards, but of committing us to them as never before, and also as providing a dynamic enabling to the realization of that ideal. A new and efficient voluntariness is begotten in the soul. This proceeds from the indwelling Christ. He alone is equal to it. He becomes the vital center of a new character for us. The atonement in the wholeness of it is more than vicarious: it is vicario-vital.<sup>10</sup>

Chapter 10 of *The Divine Reason of the Cross* is entitled, "Faith and Philosophy Congruous." Here he points out three necessary dynamic energies proceeding from the cross:

And first, observe that in the cross, even its tragic and criminal aspect, there is afforded a revelation of the nature of sin nowhere else afforded in all history. And this reacts upon us to produce conviction of our own sin. The crucifiers of Jesus were the representatives of the human race, considered on its lower plane as self-centered and averse to God ...

In pondering Calvary, in this aspect of the case, every human being may see what he potentially is, and what he must remain unless he rouses himself to the crisis necessary for every sinner to repudiate in toto the principles and the spirit of an act which could place the world's Redeemer upon that cruel cross ...

The sin of resisting this crisis is represented in the Bible as the damning sin, because it not only makes the sacrifice of God-in-Christ of none effect, but the unbeliever deliberately remains on the side of those who perpetrated this blackest crime in history ...

... remembering that the cross stands for more than crucifixion, even atonement on God's part, we find another dynamic element of great power: namely, this: that the deepest gratitude towards God is awakened in view of the atonement which was consummated on the part of God, even simultaneously with man's greatest sin. There is a point at which the criminality of man in nailing Jesus to the wood is met by the outgoing of God's own voluntary dying for the world in Christ. Man was there at his worst, but God at His sublimest ...

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<sup>8</sup>ibid., p. 30-31.

<sup>9</sup>ibid., p. 41-42.

<sup>10</sup>Henry C. Mabie, *The Divine Reason of the Cross* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1911), p. 155-156.

The ethical power of awakened gratitude, the real dynamic for moral exaltation over wrong-doing, is without an equal in the moral universe ...

But there is a third element that enters into the dynamic of the cross as it takes effect on those who really apprehend it, and have been brought under its spell. That element is the mystical energy of the Christ who died, is risen again and now dwells within us. This indwelling of Christ is the presupposition on which the atonement as objective is posited ...

Moreover, this mystic experience of the indwelling Christ is intended in the light and under the quickening influence of the cross, to be the regular and growing habit, even the second nature of the believer ...

Could any other message be so supremely preachable? How anyone with an impulse to preach at all can desire a deeper, diviner ethic is entirely beyond me to imagine.<sup>11</sup>

Dr. Mabie believed that all humanity was potentially, but not actually, redeemed by the death of Christ. Men need to be informed of their new probation before God because of the sacrifice of His Son. He says:

Since the cross of Christ's judgment has been set up in the world, all souls under its aegis are potential heirs of the grace of Christ, if they did but know it, and could be brought to actualize it. Grant that the world in large part is still truant, a runaway world, as yet ignorant of its potential heirship to Christ, and in so far really without the transforming dynamic of the gospel, yet in purpose, it has been bought in by Christ.<sup>12</sup>

The soul-winner's message is to make known to men what God has done for them through the cross. He writes:

To evangelize is to tell good news, that which is really news and that which is surprisingly joyful news,—a real saving message. To evangelize is to point out to men how they may come into a new moral and religious status under a regime which God has made possible through the sacrificial work of Himself in His Son. To evangelize a soul is to make clear to it the evangelical status made possible for it by Christ. To evangelize is to place in thought under the aegis—the protection—of an evangelical probation; an entirely different sort of probation from any that man could possibly conceive for himself apart from the Bible.<sup>13</sup>

He believed that the personal worker needed to have a clear idea of what saving faith is. He held that saving faith is "a collective, executive act of the entire soul in the direction of the ideals which it cherishes and on the basis of the measure of light enjoyed."<sup>14</sup> Thus, the Christian worker can believe that every person believes some part of God's truth. To find out what it is, and to go on from there to the whole truth concerning sin, salvation and Christ is the responsibility of the soul-winner. He says:

The essential principle at the root of all saving faith is loyalty to present spiritual light, a loyalty that is ready to act on its light. This being so, any soul may make an instant beginning anywhere, and with whatever measure of truth it has, in the school of Christ. I freely grant that this idea has not always prevailed, and is even now far from general acceptance among evangelicals.<sup>15</sup>

Again he writes:

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<sup>11</sup>ibid., p. 163-179.

<sup>12</sup>Henry C. Mabie, *The Meaning and Message of the Cross* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1906), p. 218.

<sup>13</sup>*Method in Soul-Winning*, p. 36-37.

<sup>14</sup>ibid., p. 66.

<sup>15</sup>ibid., p. 68.

To “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ” is to accept for oneself by an act of will as well as heart,—by an executive act of the soul,—the relations under the probation of grace which God purposes for him. The cross is to form the new motive power in his life under the spell of which, properly understood, man is to live, move, and have his new being. This is to render evangelical the whole habit of the new life in Christ: it is to render evangelical all practical ethics; for the ethic that is not more than ethical, even evangelical, is unethical for a fallen human being intended to be redeemed.<sup>16</sup>

Holding his view of redemption and of saving faith, he insisted that the soul-winner should seek “to put them on the clue” through “some subjective committal of themselves, whereby in the end they will come to the needed realization of God and divine things.”<sup>17</sup> He said:

It is impossible to force our view of truth into the mind of another. We must learn to take account of even the minimum of truth held by him, and then encourage the moral resolve to act upon the ray of light possessed. Thus only can any one’s measure or light be increased, and the soul itself experience a personal first-hand realization of God.<sup>18</sup>

Dr. Mabie tells his experience with an educated Russian unbeliever in Minneapolis. He held to the principle of self-renunciation as the way to peace. Dr. Mabie discerned sincerity and hunger in this young man, and invited him to come to his church and speak on any subject he wished. He spoke on Tolstoi, and was so disarmed of his prejudice against Christians that Dr. Mabie led him to Christ and baptized him. Dr. Mabie comments:

The point in method was this. I seized upon the modicum of truth which I perceived this man held. I presumed upon it, encouraged him to risk himself upon it, and shortly in so doing he came into a new state. The man was put upon the clue to his own firsthand realization of Christ, and it led him to the goal.<sup>19</sup>

The principle as Dr. Mabie restates it is this: “The real secret in soul-winning is not to win souls to ourselves, nor to the acceptance of our dogmatic views, but into the practice of following their own light, and so to an interior experience of truth and God.”<sup>20</sup> He believed in showing friendly interest in others, in commending them, in sympathizing, in avoiding argument, but always in finding the clue and putting them on to it. He claimed that “Christ is always within the personal touch of every soul, because. God’s love is so all-embracing, even though the soul does not realize it.”<sup>21</sup>

In his book, *Method in Soul-Winning*, he devotes a chapter to “Tact in Personal Approach.” He says, “A matter of very great importance in dealing successfully with souls is to know how to find the right angle of approach, so as really to commend our message.”<sup>22</sup> No two men will use precisely the same method, or adopt the same tactics, therefore, the Spirit’s special guidance is always supremely needed.

He writes:

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<sup>16</sup>ibid., p. 45.

<sup>17</sup>ibid., p. 49.

<sup>18</sup>ibid., p. 55.

<sup>19</sup>ibid., p. 59.

<sup>20</sup>ibid., p. 61.

<sup>21</sup>ibid., p. 77.

<sup>22</sup>ibid., p. 86.

This divinely wrought inventiveness—this ingenuity in getting at men in an original way, is one of the best gifts of the soul-winner. No rules can be given for its exercise; each must develop it for himself in original touch with the soul through Christ.<sup>23</sup>

He relates how he won a cynical blacksmith to Christ by visiting him, taking an interest in his work, and by taking no offense at his criticisms. The man was past sixty and others had given him up. Mabie says, "We often give up such people too easily under the influence of current impressions given out by people who take men at their worst, and we really make no earnest effort to get at their better side."<sup>24</sup>

Dr. Mabie finds Christ's method of self-disclosure illustrated by the story of the opening of the eyes of the man born blind in John 9. He believed that this method applied especially to the matter of dealing with pagan minds on foreign mission fields. The four principles which he discusses at length are these:

The first principle is this: that in Christ's method there must be sufficient humility to allow Jesus to treat His subject as He will; to let Christ manage His case in His own way, however mysterious ...

A second principle is ... that he who would come into Christ's light must be obedient enough to act on His word ...

The third principle discernible in the method of Christ which I urged upon the Brahmins was this: the importance of testimony to the measure of faith one has as fast as it comes ...

The fourth principle ... One must dare to stand alone. It takes some courage to do this. It is here chiefly that we break down.<sup>25</sup>

He believed that the most characteristic illusion of Christian workers is that people must be converted by masses, whereas the usual way is the one-by-one method.

Dr. Mabie found true principles of revival and soul-winning demonstrated in the work of Jesus in John 4 with the Samaritan woman. He lists them as follows:

(a) The Divine Reaper found His supreme satisfaction—His very food—in the accomplishment of the task on which His Father sent Him ... With us the delays in spiritual harvest are often due to our own spiritual immaturity: we wait not only "four months," but long years, and no fruit matures ...

(b) Then this Master Reaper established a friendly relation to the woman He met. He found the right point of contact: He was humanly as well as divinely wise ... He did one of the most effective things possible for overcoming aversion; He asked a favor, "Give me to drink." ...

(c) Jesus also disappointed prevailing prejudice. What tact there was in the simple favor asked ... He disarms her suspicion, using the very method which shall shortly move her even against her fears, to request grace from Him ...

(d) Christ sought for the particle of faith there was in the woman, and when found built upon it. The woman had let drop a suggestion for which the Saviour was alert: "Art thou greater than our father Jacob who gave us the well and drank thereof himself, and his sons, and his cattle?" Here was theology enough for the present need. "She is a believer in the patriarch Jacob," mused Christ; "there is faith in embryo. Starting from that I'll lead her to Myself, the well deeper and diviner than all wells of the patriarchs."

(e) Jesus developed the woman's spiritual thirst ...

(f) Christ awoke in the woman conviction for sin, and yet how delicately! ...

(g) But Jesus also had with Him that day the full answer to the ultimate religious need: He brought her the present Messiah—the Saviour ...

<sup>23</sup>ibid., p. 96.

<sup>24</sup>ibid., p. 103-104.

<sup>25</sup>ibid., p. 114-124.

(h) Jesus appreciated the previous seed-sowing of others and utilized it ... The wise harvester presumes that other workers have been before him; that the seed somehow lives because God is watching over it, and he proceeds to harvest.<sup>26</sup>

The story of how Dr. Mabie won the Russian atheist, Ivan Panin, to Christ comes from Dr. Earle V. Pierce of Minneapolis in a letter dated, January 25, 1947. He wrote:

Dr. Mabie was a great personality; a man of strong intellect, of great heart, and shepherd spirit. You will be interested in this incident. I got it from one of the deacons of Central Church and it was confirmed by Miss Lavina Mead, who was a member of that church and was for many years a missionary in Japan.

While he was pastor of the Central Church there came to the city a Russian, Ivan Panin, lecturing on atheism. Dr. Mabie went to hear him. In the course of the lecture, Panin declared he was an honest atheist. Dr. Mabie, after the lecture, asked if he could call upon Panin at his hotel, which he did.

Said Dr. Mabie, "You declared that you are an honest atheist. Does that mean that if you became convinced Christianity was true you would give up atheism?"

Panin replied, "I certainly would."

Dr. Mabie then opened his New Testament to John 7:17 and had him read that. Then said Dr. Mabie, "Have you ever met that challenge?"

"No, I have not," replied Panin.

Then Dr. Mabie arose and thundered at him, "If you ever dare open your mouth again against Christianity until you have fairly met that challenge, I will denounce you as a hypocrite from one end of the country to the other."

Panin saw what he was up against. He cancelled his lecture engagements and left the city. Two years afterward he returned, called upon Dr. Mabie and told him he had become a Christian and that he had come back to the place where he last lectured against Christianity to make his public confession and be baptized. When I told this publicly on the authority of Deacon Marnie, Miss Mead, after my address, said, "I was there and heard his confession and saw him baptized." Panin is now an old man and is the author of that remarkable book on numerics ...<sup>27</sup>

Dr. Mabie would have said of Panin that "he put him on the clue" that led him to Christ, though he used a drastic method to do it in this case.

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<sup>26</sup>ibid., p. 137-143.

<sup>27</sup>Earl C. Stemple, B.D. thesis, May, 1947, "Henry Clay Mabie as a Denominational Leader," Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Chicago, p. 57, letter to Mr. Stemple.