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THE VERY REV. JAMES GIBB:

PATRIOT INTO PACIFIST

by

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From December 1919 until October 1920 New Zealand's foremost Presbyterian minister, the Very Rev. Dr James Gibb, was engaged in an overseas recruiting campaign designed to add twenty ministers and twenty suitable lay home missionaries to the ranks of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand. James Gibb was the obvious choice for this commission to search out ministers and exit year students from within the Church of Scotland and the Presbyterian Churches of England and Ireland. Despite his trial for heresy in 1890 Gibb had established himself as a pillar of evangelical orthodoxy who by the combined force of his personality and persistency had in 1901 forced the union of New Zealand's two Presbyterian churches.¹ He was the convener of the new church's Home Mission committee, a committee that had scattered so many Presbyterian ministers and home mission agents throughout New Zealand's country back-blocks that in 1912 Gibb was able to boast to the Presbyterian General Assembly:

Already we have, as is evidenced by the Government ecclesiastical statistics, more persons attending our services than those of the Anglican Church, which comes next in order.²

Founder of two church schools, Scots College and Queen Margaret's College; father of Presbyterian social service activities in the Wellington Province, minister of one of the Dominion's largest congregations, forceful orator and skilled ecclesiastical politician, Gibb in public influence at least rivalled and probably surpassed that of the Anglican and Roman Catholic archbishops. In the political sphere he influenced a powerful Protestant lobby. A hesitant supporter of W.F. Massey's conservative Reform party government Gibb addressed oral and written advice to 'our Presbyterian Prime Minister'³ on issues as varied as the Government's labour policy, temperance, drilling of troops on Sundays and the need for the Bible to be taught in state schools. During the 1914-1918 war Gibb added to his public reputation by taking upon himself the role of a zealous patriot. He did not exaggerate when in the 1930's he lamented 'I was as good as a recruiting agent during the War'⁴ - his recorded utterances bear out his contention. At the 1914 Presbyterian General Assembly in moving the traditional motion of loyalty to the throne Gibb denounced the German army's 'excesses of lust and cruelty'.⁵ In April 1915 Gibb's patriotic fervour led him to use the occasion of an invitation to preach in Christchurch to deliver an attack on New Zealand's war contribution. Gibb quickly tipped his hat in farewell to his sermon's text, a passage from St John's

Gospel that argued 'if ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins'.⁶ Within a few minutes the guest preacher attacked

the great malignant nation with which we are now warring (it) had thrown down the challenge to Christ, and it was inexorably doomed.⁷

Gibb then satirically paraphrased the war creed of the German leaders:

Blessed are the valiant; blessed are the great in soul and strength for they shall enter into Valhalla; blessed are the war-makers for they shall be called the children of God, or of Odin, who is greater than God.⁸

In no doubt that those fighting on the side of the allies were fighting on the side of God and Christianity, Gibb then disadvantageously compared New Zealand's enlistment figures with those of Australia and Great Britain and concluded:

It is the urgent duty of all men of age and physical fitness to offer themselves at once to their country, and it is the duty of all women to surrender their men, nay, to bring pressure to bear on them to do their duty to the flag.⁹

The editor of the Press eulogised Gibb's address in an editorial that demanded 'at least 6,000 men ... within the next six weeks'.

The stirring sermon preached by the Rev Dr Gibb ... last evening should have an inspiring effect, and we should like to see similar efforts from a score of other pulpits in this province.¹⁰

By August 1915 he had worked himself to a fever of patriotic zeal and informed a packed congregation at a state and civic memorial service in the Wellington Town Hall :

Every unmarried man should volunteer. Even it is coming to this, that every married man who is physically fit should report himself to the authorities and say, "When in your judgement the time is come, here am I, send me".¹¹

Gibb cleverly suggested that Kitchener's call was God's call, a suggestion made by quoting Isaiah's response to God and indicating that this was every married man's proper response to the recruiting officer.¹² As Gibb warmed to his task Christian charity was forgotten

We are pledged to this conflict, to see that the insensate pride, the strong ambition, the merciless cruelty, in one word the militarism of Germany, shall be brought reeling and crushing to the dust.¹³

Stern in his determination that the ministry should play its part in the war effort Gibb successfully moved in the 1917 Presbyterian General Assembly that 'military exemption shall be sought for no minister called to service whose place can in any way be filled'.¹⁴

Gibb's jingoism was applauded by many New Zealanders and his patriotic sentiment differed little from that expressed by other leading clerics who given the extent of the Dominion's contribution of manpower to the war¹⁵ effort preferred to lambast the enemy rather than use the pulpit as a vehicle for the soothing sound of Christian charity. Gibb's opportunity to sway public opinion was greater than that allowed to most parsons and he used this opportunity to address patriotic rallies, church courts and congregations on the need for even greater enlistment numbers for the armed forces and the need to crush the central European powers. Gibb's elder son was a minister and his younger son was too young to enlist but Gibb did not allow his family's failure to contribute soldiers to inhibit his demand that younger brothers should follow older brothers to the Front. Those who could volunteer and would not be treated with contempt. Occasionally, and not surprisingly anonymously, a few of New Zealand's more pacific citizens replied, provoked by the charge of cowardice and upset by Gibb's marriage of war and religion. Following a particularly fierce jingoistic sermon in early September 1916 Gibb received this retort from Dunedin:

We've a man down here, doctor, that can beat you hollow at war sermons, simply beat you hollow. I've heard him. You know the style:- Righteousness, Liberty, Freedom &c. These catchwords are diplomatically sandwiched while he rubs on the war paint. It's all so delightful, so uplifting, so unprejudiced, so cosmopolitan, so likely to enhance the Kingdom of God on earth.¹⁶

When in 1919 the Presbyterian General Assembly commissioned Gibb to recruit additional ministers from the United Kingdom its members by selecting Gibb paid tribute to his standing in the church, city and nation. However, a few New Zealanders, especially those still confined in prison following their conscientious objection to enlistment, probably thought it poetic justice that the Defence department's clerical 'recruiting officer' should have his abilities so aptly recognised.

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Gibb succeeded in his mission and reported that arrangements were in hand for the first of the new recruits to arrive in New Zealand towards the close of 1920. When Gibb himself returned to Wellington his friends found to their consternation and his enemies to their joy that whilst abroad he had become enamoured with a new crusade. He returned a vocal anti-militarist, a League of Nations man who beat his pacifist drum so loudly that his own congregation at St John's began to empty and his power within the Presbyterian Church courts diminished as presbyters, who were also patriotic New Zealanders, saw the extent of his new crusading fervour. Gibb returned no longer even a reserved supporter of Massey's Reform government but with a new interest in the Labour party and its policies, especially those policies concerned with the elimination of social injustice and the establishment of world peace.

At what point of time did the patriotic parson adopt pacifism and move from his previous political stance? Ormond Burton, a well known New Zealand churchman, writer, and pacifist who served a term in prison for his anti-militarism during the Second World War, holds that Gibb 'left New Zealand orthodox and returned something of a revolutionary'.¹⁷ This claims too much for the impact of a few months abroad, even months of intense diplomatic and political activity, and pays too little heed to the evidence of Gibb's movement away from the role of unofficial recruiting officer, in the two years prior to his European visit.

How and when did Gibb reach his volte face? Charles Murray, an erudite Christchurch minister, was the crucial figure in Gibb's movement from militarism to anti-militarism. On the eve of the first World War Murray was convener of the General Assembly's committee on International Peace and as such was in communication