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Archival Project: The Spiritual Legacy of Samuel Morris at Taylor University

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The Spiritual Legacy of Samuel Morris at Taylor University

Institutions are often considered the “lengthened shadows” of individuals, and therefore, Taylor University owes much to the influence of Samuel Morris (1873-1893) (Wengatz, 1954, p. 5). No other student in the history of Taylor University would surpass Morris’ influence on the spiritual legacy of Taylor, thereby revolutionizing its approach to Christian education – an approach that continues to train not just the mind but also inform the heart and spirit (Wengatz, 1954). Not only did Morris leave a spiritual imprint upon the University through his life which was completely dedicated to Christ, but through his death prepared Taylor for her mission in the world, and raised a generation of men and women filled with the “missionary spirit” who went to the ends of the world for the sake of the Gospel (Wengatz, 1954; Masa, 1928, p. 85; Fant, 1975).

Historical Context

Born in 1873 in a Liberian village in West Africa to a chief of the Kru tribe, Samuel Morris was named Prince Kaboo. In his teens, he was subjected to cruel treatment at the hands of a neighboring clan that defeated his people and held to ransom. However, he was able to escape when he saw a bright light, and heard a voice from Heaven that told him to flee. Eventually, when he arrived in the city of Monrovia, a young boy invited him to church, and hearing Miss Knolls (missionary and graduate of Taylor University which was then known as Fort Wayne College), speak about Paul’s conversion (which he saw as similar to his experience), accepted Christ as Savior and was baptized as Samuel Morris, in honor of the missionaries’ benefactor (Wengatz, 1954; Reade, 1896).

Morris’ zeal for, and desire to, know more about the Holy Spirit put him on a ship to America where he desired to seek instruction from Stephen Merritt, a former secretary to Bishop William Taylor. Through a gruelling journey, during which he helped the ship captain accept

Christ, Morris arrived in America, and was received by Stephen Merritt. Merritt was profoundly impacted by the sublime faith of Morris, and contacted the then-Taylor President, Thaddeus Reade, to have Morris enroll at Taylor, and started a fund for him (which would be later known as the Faith Fund), given that Taylor was in financial debt (Wengatz, 1954; Reade, 1896).

Samuel Morris at Taylor University

In December 1891, Morris arrived at Taylor campus (then in Fort Wayne). Sammy's (as he was endearingly called) coming to Taylor was providential and made Reade remark,

“Samuel Morris was a divinely sent messenger of God to touch Taylor University. He thought he was coming over to prepare himself for his mission – he was coming over to this country to prepare Taylor University for her mission in this world...she got a vision of the world's needs. It was no longer local, but world-wide” (Masa, 1928, p. 85)

The unique influence of Morris at Taylor could be attributed to who he was rather than what he did. His distinctive method of influencing others was found in his brand of spiritual leadership – not by argument or sermons but by simply “invoking the Holy Spirit to act” (Baldwin, 1886, p. 21). His influence was felt not just by the majority of the student body but also by skeptics among them. While most of the students at Taylor were sincere Christians, there was also a diluting of faith, and a growing sense of worldliness among the churches and the church colleges. Biblical authority was often undermined by the then popular Darwinian theory of evolution. Taylor University was controlled at that time by a ministerial association of the Methodist Episcopal church and maintained an exceptionally rigorous spiritual standard of education, and yet the large majority of the denominational clergymen and laymen had a nominal faith in the work of the Holy Spirit, as proclaimed by John Wesley, the founder of Methodism (Baldwin, 1886).

Morris revolutionized the entire University from the President to the newest freshman by living out the power of the Holy Spirit, and through his humility. “The whole school was lifted to a higher plane in which the students were not merely ‘saved’ but spiritually strengthened to save others” (Baldwin. 1886, p. 63; Konkel). A letter written by Morris’ classmate, Rev. A. J. Duryee, a retired Methodist minister to Robert Lee Stuart (President of Taylor in 1931), gives insights into the influence of Morris at Taylor that was a function of his relationship with the Holy Spirit. Duryee writes in the letter,

“His life came to me in the Spring term of Taylor University in 1893. Sammy Morris to me was something real, never to be forgotten by those who came into contact with him. His holy life and Christ spirit shows in his face something more than a mortal being but a real Christ-like man with the Holy Spirit” (Duryee, 1934).

No student at the University ever attained the fame as Samuel Morris. All who had the privilege of meeting him were impressed with his simple faith in God, and his supernatural life. His fame spread to different states even as students talked about him to others (Merritt & Reade). Morris changed Taylor University by his determination to evangelize the entire student body and faculty, one person at a time, and as his friends were won to Christ and ministered to others in turn, Taylor University was set on fire for God (Miller, 1951). Hearing of the work of Morris, many interested friends sent money, and the Samuel Morris Faith Fund came into being. However, Morris always viewed these funds as his “Father’s money,” even as his prayers for others took the form of “talking to his Father” (Miller, 1951, p. 60; Reade, 1979, p. 8).

While Taylor University had always admitted students from all backgrounds, Sammy Morris was arguably the first Negro to be admitted to her halls. The love and respect that he earned from all at the University was unmatched and a testament of his legacy at Taylor – a

legacy of making Taylor a school where students not only secured the most superior mental development but also maintained their spiritual life (Reade, 1896). In this context, therefore, it would not be wrong to conclude that Morris was a forerunner, a pioneer in laying down a model of education where learning and faith were integrated – he put his “stamp of spirituality” on Taylor that made her distinct in the educational world (Reade, 1896, p. 34).

No other student of Taylor University has had the impact on the direction of the institution as Morris though his days as a student were short-lived, spanning only the last two years the University was in Fort Wayne (1891-1893) (Reade, 1896). On May 12, 1893, Samuel Morris died after developing a severe cold, and his funeral took place from the Berry Street Church to which he belonged. It was the largest witnessed in the city of Fort Wayne (Reed, 1908). Morris achieved more by coming to America for only a few years than he could ever have in Africa. Inspired by his example, Spirit-filled Taylor students have carried on his legacy by going out to the corners of the world, including Sammy’s beloved Africa, with the Gospel message (Reade, 1896; Lageer, 1958).

In the fall of 1893, Taylor University was moved to Upland, Indiana due to the heavy indebtedness of the school at Fort Wayne. However, this transfer did not look promising initially, and brought the institution to the verge of bankruptcy. However, the conviction that God’s hand was upon Taylor University, led the then President, Thaddeus Reade to write a brief biography of Samuel Morris in the form of a pamphlet, titled “Sammy Morris (Prince Kaboo),” which reached a total circulation of 200,000 copies (Masa, 1928). The booklet was eventually translated into other languages in European countries and sold many copies. Not only did the booklet bring in students and gifts of money to the University, but the mass sale of the books generated sums of money which was used to help educate worthy students with limited means who could not

afford an education at Taylor without this support (Masa, 1928). Within a year after the relocation of the University from Fort Wayne to Upland, a memorial building, Sammy Morris Hall, was constructed in his honor. That wooden structure was replaced by the Sammy Morris Residence Hall in 1958 which has continued to house men and women on the campus (Reade, 1896).

Thus, the very existence of Taylor was sustained by the life of Morris, and even in his death his influence on the University continued to the extent of preventing its closure. It can be said, “the very life of the school depended upon the dynamic of this Spirit-filled life, preserved and released to the reading religious world by the pen of Thaddeus C. Reade” (Masa, 1928, p. 90). The coming of Sammy Morris also provided solutions for the student aid problem through the establishment of the Faith Fund. Beginning in 1891 when Jacob Kichler offered a five-dollar bill marking the first contribution to the Samuel Morris Faith Fund, Taylor has continued to aid others like Morris around the world (Masa, 1928).

The Faith Fund has revolutionized Taylor University, granting it a new direction in its work. Given the number of students engaged in ministry at Taylor and foreign missionary work, it might almost be called a theological seminary and this aspect of the school can be attributed to the establishment of the Faith Fund (Reade, 1896). Without the Faith Fund, one would speculate that Taylor University may not have attained its present position of leadership and responsibility. Therefore, in an indirect sense, Morris has blessed the Christian cause both in America and abroad by helping the needs of men and women committed to ministry (Masa, 1928). For Taylor specifically, the story of Morris has in a literal sense breathed life into the institution, and ensured its perpetuation at a time when external circumstances threatened its existence and

legacy. Thus, the legacy of Morris and Taylor are intertwined, with the former being the foundation of all that the institution has achieved over the years.

Taylor's graduating class of 1928 felt the need for a more suitable monument to be erected to honor the sacred memory of Samuel Morris than the small, obscure stone previously marking his grave. Therefore, a larger memorial was purchased by the class, with funds being contributed by Fort Wayne citizens. The new monument had the following inscription that etched Morris' contribution to Taylor in stone, "Student at Taylor, University 1892-3 Fort Wayne, now located at Upland, Indiana. The story of his life a vital contribution to the development of Taylor University" (Wengatz, 1954, p. 66).

In 1996, after receiving a \$3.15 million grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc., Taylor established the Samuel Morris Scholars Program to assist Indiana students with college potential to pursue Christian liberal arts college education (Sloan, Fort Wayne Alumnus, 1997). In 2006, Taylor University and the Sinoe County Association in the Americas (SCAA) took the story of Samuel Morris back to Liberia, and in 2016, the Samuel Morris Educational Resource Center was dedicated (Mortensen, The Fort Wayne Vine, 2016). Thus, the legacy of Morris lives on at Taylor and in his beloved Liberia, even as students from all over the world are attracted to Taylor University.

Significance of the Study: Implications for Taylor and Higher Education

Thaddeus Reade captures the ongoing legacy of Morris when he says, "Samuel Morris is not dead; Taylor University is his monument" (Reade, 1896, p. 34). Samuel Morris' biggest contribution has been to make Taylor University a "spiritual school" even as the institution has continued to intellectually develop the men and women who have entered her halls (Reade, 1896, p. 40). Since Morris' arrival in 1891, students have been coming to Taylor from different

countries in order to be equipped to minister to their homelands. “They come especially to bless their own country, but passing through the school they lift others into a spiritual realm that makes them a blessing to every student that comes within her walls” (Reade, 1896, p. 34).

Since the shoots can never be in a sense severed from their roots, the guarantee of ongoing blessings upon Taylor University rests on its rootedness to the legacy of its spiritual founder Samuel Morris who was an “instrument in the hands of the Holy Spirit for the greater and grander development of the University” (Merritt & Reade, p. 8). Morris serves as a link between the past and future generation for “we are because he was.” In a literal sense, Taylor University was preserved because of Morris’ legacy, but his life is also a reminder that the Spirit who was in him is also in us, and to the extent Christian institutions allow themselves to be led by the Spirit in the designing of their programs and institutions, they will be pioneers and models of excellence in their integration of faith and learning.

The life of Samuel Morris is a testament of the fact that God honors availability more than ability, and that He qualifies the called, and not the other way around. It is a sober reminder for individuals and institutions even as one witnesses the breakout of revival on campuses like Asbury, that God rather than man, is the supreme head of institutions, and that sometimes going back to the basics (allowing the Spirit to move in institutions), is the most radical action to exact changes in institutions.

A profound implication gleaned from the life of Samuel Morris is the acknowledgement that learning is a two-way street, and often students have the potential to teach instructors, given the readiness of the latter to receive from the former. The legacy of Morris also serves to dispel the myth of the wisdom coming from age, and the myth of Western culture being the most spiritual (Bayer). Given the spiritual crisis in the West, and with the decentralization of

Christianity in Western countries, a mutual openness to receive between cultures and the institutions therein can be transformative in making institutions truly global, without compromising on their spiritual foundations.

The implications of the life of Samuel Morris to Taylor University would be manifold. Even as Biblical authority continues to be undermined in an age of permissiveness and relative standards, Morris' model of reliance on the absolute truth of Scriptures may need to be revisited at Taylor and other Christian universities. Spiritual formation for students would need to be a by-product of growing vertically and therefore, then horizontally, in relationships with people. A distinction between wisdom and knowledge should be the need of the hour even as students are encouraged to develop the former in the context of a growing intimacy with the Spirit rather than a lopsided focus on the latter through the internalization of mere theory. Finally, as Taylor continues to open its halls to students of different backgrounds, the ability to receive from people of varied cultures, so as to define the world as a mission field, would be a desirable goal in the formulation of educational and missional policy.

Conclusion

Samuel Morris left his spiritual imprint on Taylor University in life and in death (Ringenberg, 1996). In his brief life of twenty years, he operated as a spiritual giant, changing the spiritual thermostat at Taylor University through his surrender to, and operating in, the power of the Holy Spirit. Through his personal story and personal influence, he laid the foundation of a piety-holiness model of education, and inspired generations of men and women to a life of personal and professional fruitfulness (Ringenberg, 1996). The brevity of his life in no way diminished his impact upon Taylor and the world, even as he accomplished his divine assignment to create an everlasting legacy.

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