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Andrew Bonar 1810-1892

Andrew Bonar

Rev Maurice Roberts

Rev Maurice Roberts is the minister of

Andrew Alexander Bonar was born in Edinburgh on May 29th 1810, just two hundred years ago this year. He was the seventh son of James Bonar, whose occupation was that of a search solicitor of Excise. His mother's name was Marjory Maitland. Andrew Bonar's father died in 1821, when Andrew was just a boy. The responsibility for the care of the family and the upbringing of the children was taken over by the eldest son James, who became Andrew's 'second father'. The Bonars were a godly family and their home church in Edinburgh was Lady Glenorchy's Chapel, whose Reformed and evangelical minister was a Dr Jones, a Welshman.

THE BONAR FAMILY

The Bonars were a covenanting family who could trace their descent 'from one who in the days of the Covenant forsook Episcopacy and forfeited ease and position, if not wealth, that he might become a minister of Christ in the Presbyterian Church of Scotland'¹.

The Bonar family produced 'numerous Church of Scotland ministers over several generations'². Besides Andrew Bonar and his two brothers John and Horatius, we may here mention others. The Rev Archibald Bonar was an evangelical Church of Scotland minister (1753-1816), who served in Fife, Glasgow and Cramond, near Edinburgh. In his youth he had been influenced by George

¹ Rev AA Bonar, DD, Fergus Ferguson, p.233.

² Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology, p.84.

Whitefield, who had been an acquaintance of his family. He was a strong advocate of revival and of missionary work³.

Another relation of earlier times was the Rev John Bonar, Church of Scotland minister of Torphichen in West Lothian. This good man laboured fifty-four years in his parish, being ordained in 1693. He kept the light of the gospel burning there till 1747. When he heard of the revivals in Kilsyth and Cambuslang, which occurred in 1742, though he was now old and frail, he went to be a witness of God's glorious work. It took him three days to ride to the spot. He was thrilled to see the work of the Holy Spirit in these two parishes. He returned home and, lifting up his hands, he cried out, 'Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation'⁴.

When Robert Murray M'Cheyne was licensed to preach in July 1835 he became assistant to another of the Bonar family, the Rev John Bonar of Larbert and Dunipace. This is the area near Stirling. Indeed, so many were the ministers who had the name of Bonar in the Scottish church that when Andrew Bonar was Moderator of the Free Church of Scotland in 1878 he referred in his own quaint way to his family as 'the tribe of the Bonars'⁵.

Andrew and Horatius are now the best-known of this noble family; but it ought to be remembered that they had yet another brother in the ministry named John Bonar. All three of these brothers lived to a ripe old age and all kept to the faith of the gospel of Christ to the end of their lives. Andrew served in Collace, Perthshire, and later in Finnieston, Glasgow. John served in Greenock, a little south of Glasgow. Horatius, or Horace, as Andrew always called him, served in the Border town of Kelso and later in Edinburgh.

³ *Ibid.*, p.84.

⁴ *Diary and Letters of AA Bonar*, p.vii-viii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.208.

TRIBUTES TO ANDREW BONAR

Before we look in some detail at the life of Andrew Bonar let us hear two or three Tributes which were paid to him at the time of his death in 1892. Bonar was then aged eighty-two. The first Tribute is an Extract from the Kirk Session Minutes of his own Church in Glasgow referring to his decease. The Minute is dated 9th January 1893:

‘It is impossible, within the compass of a Minute such as this, to tell what Dr Bonar has been to us all, or to speak at all adequately of the manifold gifts bestowed on him by [Christ] the great Head of the Church – gifts which he so fully and unweariedly exercised among us. The sound of the voice now silent can never cease to vibrate in our hearts as we remember how he used to plead with the unsaved to “flee from the wrath to come”, beseeching them to be “reconciled to God”. How he delighted to set forth Christ as the Alpha and Omega of the Word! And after the manner of [Christ] the Great Teacher, “expounded in all the scriptures the things concerning Himself”, till all our hearts were made to “burn within us” and the living Person of Emmanuel seemed to “show Himself through the lattice” of the written Word’⁶.

The following tribute is from Theodore Cuyler of America and is interesting in that it compares the ministerial styles and characters of these two brothers, Andrew and Horatius:

‘Horatius [Bonar] was like Lord Macaulay’s Roman hero of that name who “kept the bridge in the brave days of old”; he was a man of war and had a strong propensity for ecclesiastical controversies. It is a singular fact, that the greatest of Scottish hymnists should have been one of the greatest sticklers for singing nothing but the Psalms in Church; and the man whose poetry was full of brotherly love should have been an uncompromising opponent of Presbyterian Re-

⁶ Ferguson, p.108.

union!

‘But Andrew was a man of gentler mould; he was the Melancthon of the Scottish church. A more sweet-spirited Christian I never knew. One of his letters, which I received from him in July 1879 commences with these words: “My dear brother, the overflowing Philadelphia of your letter almost makes me ashamed. We ought to love one another out of a pure heart *fervently*, like the Master; and your letter warmed my heart”⁷.

Let me at this point give one tribute more to Andrew Bonar on the occasion of his death in 1892. This one is particularly interesting in that it is from the pen of the Rev HCG Moule, Principal of Ridley Hall, Cambridge:

‘Dr Andrew Bonar was in later years less widely known, perhaps, than his younger brother, Dr Horatius, the deep tender poet of the believer’s life. But [Andrew Bonar] as the writer, forty-nine years ago, of the “Memoir of Robert Murray M’Cheyne”, that converting and sanctifying biography, he has had innumerable thankful readers, and still has, for only a few weeks ago I saw announced a new edition of the book. And multitudes thank him for his expository work too. His mind had all the tenderness and depth of his brother’s, much of its poetic instinct, all its insight into revealed truth, and firm hold of it’⁸.

Note: There is a slight inaccuracy here in this comment by Moule. Horatius was not a younger but an older brother of Andrew. Even fine scholars can make mistakes!

OUTLINE OF ANDREW BONAR’S LIFE

We have seen that Andrew Bonar was born in Edinburgh in 1810 as the youngest of several brothers. He attended Edinburgh High

⁷ Ibid., p.165-6.

⁸ Ibid., p.230.

School and there became Dux and Gold Medallist. The Rector, Dr Carson, said of him that Andrew Bonar was undoubtedly the best Latin scholar who had ever passed through his hands. He proceeded to Edinburgh University and there achieved a high academic record. It was while still at University that he became a close friend of Robert Murray M'Cheyne, who also came from Edinburgh. As we well know, their friendship was to become most important in future years.

Andrew Bonar was converted in the year 1830 when he was twenty years of age. His own words expressing his judgment on his own experience are: 'born again and fully brought to Christ'⁹. He proceeded to the study of Divinity in Edinburgh under the renowned Dr Thomas Chalmers and Dr Welsh. Of these men he wrote: 'teachers whom I will never forget'¹⁰. Here his close friendship with M'Cheyne, whom he had known at school and at university, was further strengthened. These two men, like David and Jonathan, were bound together in the love of Christ.

Two important movements were taking place in Scotland while these men were at the Divinity Hall in the years 1832 to 1836. The first of these movements was the Non-Intrusion controversy which culminated in the Disruption of 1843. The second was a movement of revival which was evident at these years and which came to a climax in the Kilsyth revival of 1838-9.

After a century and more of a chilling, non-evangelical Moderatism Scotland was at this date beginning to feel the gracious winds of spiritual blessing once again. Powerful evangelical voices were now being heard again in defence of the true biblical gospel. Notable among them were Dr Andrew Mitchell Thomson (1779-1831) and Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847). Andrew Thomson was a man of 'colossal mind', who, according to Thomas Chalmers, 'carried as if

⁹ Ibid., p.177.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.177.

by storm the convictions of the people'. He was fearless in attacking Moderatism. His preaching and strong leadership had attracted a large following and his future influence looked very promising. However to the dismay of all evangelicals in Scotland he suddenly died in the midst of life in 1831.

Thomas Chalmers, who had previously been himself of the Moderate party in the Church of Scotland, from now on took the lead in carrying the banner of evangelicalism in the Church of Scotland. Chalmers had been wonderfully converted to faith in Christ after a threatening illness. This happened in the years 1810-11, about the very time of Andrew Bonar's birth. From being a formal Christian and an academic he now became aflame with evangelistic zeal.

Andrew Bonar and Robert M'Cheyne were two of a number of very fine young men at the Edinburgh Divinity Hall whose hearts God had touched. Others include William Chalmers Burns, later to go to China, A N Somerville, later to be well-known internationally as a fine preacher of Christ's gospel, Horatius Bonar and others. These young men at College used to rise early and meet for Bible study and prayer. It is remarkable to us now after the passage of many years to read that in their own day these young men were ridiculed by the older ministers. Those who were in the Moderate party of the Church of Scotland scoffed at them for their piety and spirituality. Their nick-name for the evangelical was that they were the 'infantry' of the Church. The term was used scornfully of course to mean that they were no more than infants! Happily posterity has taken a very different view of M'Cheyne and the Bonars. It is a lesson in the passing to us all to care only for God's judgment of us. What men think of us is nothing in the end.

It ought also to be noted that these young men in Edinburgh under Dr Thomas Chalmers resembled the young men who a century earlier had gathered at Oxford in the Holy Club to pray and wait on

God as they prepared themselves for vitally important gospel work in the years to come. What these young men in Edinburgh learned was Westminster theology, the teaching of the great Puritans. With this theology they would in the years to come go out to win many souls for Christ. It is a reminder to us of how important it is to give a right training to our young theology students in the formative years of their life.

On completion of his theological studies Andrew Bonar was licensed by the Presbytery of Jedburgh and proceeded to work as a home missionary for eighteen months before taking on an assistantship under Dr Robert Smith Candlish in Edinburgh. Candlish of course was to be one of the notable leaders in the post-Disruption church. Candlish's dates are 1806-73. He was an eminent preacher and used home missionary assistants to extend his large and influential congregation of St George's in the West End of Edinburgh. Candlish, Chalmers and Cunningham are names of high repute still to this day in the Disruption Free Church of Scotland.

The first part of the nineteenth century was firmly Postmillennial. However, against the main stream of Postmillennialism at that time it is to be noted that the two Bonar brothers, Horatius and Andrew were both to embrace Premillennialism. They were influenced in this principally by Edward Irving, the father of the Charismatic theory. Irving was an erratic figure in his theology but M'Cheyne felt confident that he was a truly converted man who loved Christ. Premillennial views were rare in Scotland at this time but they were to become very common among the Plymouth Brethren, who united them to the Dispensationalism of their leader JN Darby. The Bonar brothers were not Dispensationalists but they did believe in the Premillennarian scheme of eschatology. M'Cheyne did not share Bonar's Premillennial views but this fact did not spoil their friendship. Interestingly enough, it appears that Dr Thomas

Chalmers eventually came to embrace Premillennialism himself.

At this point we must note that the principal source of information for the life of Bonar is to be found in his own private Diary, published after his death under the title 'Diary and Letters'. He had begun keeping a Diary in 1828 and he continued to make regular entries right up to the month in which he died at the age of eighty-two in December of 1892. This diary was written by Bonar in what was called Byrom's shorthand, which his father and his elder brother James had also been able to write in. Apparently this form of shorthand was used in the House of Lords in these days and was taught at Oxford and Cambridge. The Diary therefore had to be 'translated' into ordinary script by Bonar's daughter, Marjory, who was one of the few who were able to read it. This she did for the benefit of the public after her father's death. The Diary is in a number of helpful sections which summarise his life:

1. Conversion and College Life: 1828-34.
2. Work in Jedburgh and Edinburgh: 1835-38.
3. His First Ministry – at Collace: 1838-56.
4. Early Years at Finnieston: 1857-64.
5. Ministry in Glasgow: 1864-75.
6. Labours more Abundant: 1876-88.
7. The Closing Years: 1889-92.

THE MINISTRY AT COLLACE: 1838-56

Bonar's eighteen years at Collace in Perthshire were years of fruitfulness and blessing. He knew what it was for some time to strive and to labour hard and yet not at first to see much progress. Since Collace was not more than about fifteen miles from Dundee where M'Cheyne was inducted to, it was often the case that each was in the company of the other and shared the work of preaching in each other's pulpit.

One significant entry in the Diary at this period is: ‘Preached on Psalm 22. Wondering if God will come and visit my people. I met in the evening with this remark in [Jonathan] Edwards: “It is God’s way to let ministers try all their strength first, and then He Himself comes and subdues the hearts they cannot”. Perhaps God is trying me thus. I am using all means, and all my power, and it avails nothing’¹¹.

It is clear that from the first Bonar’s soul thirsted for revival. In fact he was privileged to see in his lifetime four periods of revival and of special blessing. These were to be 1839 when God visited Kilsyth in power. The second period was at the Disruption of 1843 when many seasons of refreshing were granted in Scotland. The third period was the 1859 revival in which many thousands of souls were gathered into Christ’s kingdom. The fourth period was in the campaigns held in Scotland by the American preacher DL Moody in the 1870s when many hundreds were saved in great campaigns in Edinburgh, Glasgow and elsewhere.

The first of these periods of awakening was at Kilsyth and the man whom God used mightily at that time was William Chalmers Burns who was later to go to China and to have an influence on Dr Hudson Taylor of the China Inland Mission. The following is of interest as it is a description by Prof Fergus Ferguson of the difference in style of the preaching of Andrew Bonar and Robert M’Cheyne. It dates from this early period:

‘Soon after [their return from the Holy Land – an event which we must refer to at some length in a moment] Mr Bonar and Mr M’Cheyne came to Kelso, where an awakening was going on under the ministry of Mr Horatius Bonar. It was there that the present writer first saw and heard these gifted men. Mr M’Cheyne’s preaching was so characterized by clearness, beauty, love, tenderness,

¹¹ Diary and Letters of AA Bonar, p.79.

solemnity, and power, that the effect on congregations was simply marvellous. Mr Bonar's thoughts were more original and striking, but there was less of heart-melting pathos. His words often fell gently like refreshing dew, interrupted now and then with rich appeals of startling solemnity. His preaching was most instructive and suggestive. He seemed to see into the heart of a text, and he used the written word to turn every eye to the Living Word, the Lord Jesus'¹².

God's ways are not man's ways. In the mystery of providence revival broke out in St Peter's Dundee whilst their minister, Robert M'Cheyne was absent in Palestine. M'Cheyne was to come home to find that God's Spirit was working there in a wonderful way. Let us say something about this visit which these men made to Palestine in the year 1839.

MISSION TO PALESTINE

There were four men sent by the Church of Scotland: Andrew Bonar, Robert M'Cheyne, Dr Alexander Black and Dr Alexander Keith. The purpose of the mission was to enquire into the state of the Jewish people in what had once been their homeland but which for many centuries now had been more or less occupied by other nations – or rather left desolate. What lay in the minds of these men and of those who were responsible for sending them was the belief which we refer to as the 'Puritan hope'. That is to say the belief that one day in the future God will revive the Jewish people and graft them into the Church once more. The classic passages which refer to this prophecy are these. First Paul says: 'There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer and shall turn ungodliness from Jacob' (Romans 11:26). Christ also had given this prophecy: 'Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of

¹² Ferguson, p.179.

the Lord' (Matthew 32:39). Again Christ had prophesied: 'Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled (Luke 21:24).

This 'Puritan Hope' with respect to the Jews had been in the minds and hearts of Christians in Scotland since the seventeenth century at least. The following words from Samuel Rutherford show how strongly Scottish Christians had believed in the future restoration of Israel:

'O to see the sight, next to Christ's Coming in the clouds, the most joyful! Our elder brethren the Jews and Christ fall upon one another's necks and kiss each other! They have been long asunder; they will be kind to one another when they meet. O day! O longed-for and lovely day-dawn! O sweet Jesus, let me see that sight which will be as life from the dead, Thee and Thy ancient people in mutual embrace'¹³.

It will be remembered that Andrew Bonar was later to edit Rutherford's famous Letters. He was well aware of this hope that one day God would graft the Jews back into His church. This lay at the root of the exploratory visit therefore which these four men paid at this date to Palestine. The year was 1839, just a few years after Bonar and M'Cheyne had entered into their full pastoral ministries.

Andrew Bonar evidently undertook the major part of the writing up of this exploratory visit to Palestine. Robert M'Cheyne drew some sketches on Palestinian sites and scenes. The account opens with a description of their journey through France, Italy, Malta and Greece to Egypt and the South of Palestine. They saw Jerusalem, Hebron, Samaria, Carmel, Syrophenicia and Galilee. The return journey took them to Smyrna and Constantinople and then through Poland to Hamburg on their way back home.

¹³ Letters of S. Rutherford, vol.1, Letter 50, p.145.

It is of interest to mention that Andrew Bonar accidentally dropped his Bible into Jacob's Well. Several years later it was recovered and placed in a museum in Edinburgh¹⁴! As they travelled from place to place, Andrew Bonar tried out his Hebrew on some of the children whom they met. To one child he put the question 'MI AV MOSHE?' ('Who is Moses' father?')¹⁵.

One very interesting and important providence relating to their visit was that Dr Keith, one of the four men in the party, was a friend of Archduchess Dorothea of Hungary. This friendship paved the way for the establishment of a Jewish mission in Pest (modern Budapest, Hungary)¹⁶.

In 1841, two years after this visit of the four men, the Church of Scotland sent Dr John ('Rabbi') Duncan to work as a missionary among the Jews. Duncan was a very gifted Hebraist and a man of extraordinary learning. His influence among Jews in Hungary and elsewhere was profound. Among the Jews whom he led to Christ were Alfred Edersheim and Aaron Adolph Saphir. Both these scholarly Jewish men came to Britain after their conversion to Christ. Both were to write important books from a Christian standpoint. Both were the fruits under God's good hand of the Scottish witness in Budapest, which, albeit indirectly, had a vital connection with the visit of Bonar, M'Cheyne and their two learned companions to the Holy Land in 1839.

The book which gives the record of the visit to Palestine has recently been republished with an Introduction by Principal Allan Harman. Harman writes: 'It is hard to estimate the indirect effect of this mission of enquiry'. The same writer also states: 'The outcome was a deep commitment to Jewish missions so that evangelical Christians in Scotland to this day [1996] are known for their

¹⁴ Ferguson, p.40.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.49.

¹⁶ Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology, p.452.

concern to bring the news of the Messiah to Jewish people¹⁷.

Andrew Bonar tells us in his Diary that he got back to Edinburgh on November 14th 1839 after this long trip. He was back in his parish a few days later. When he did reach home it was to discover that God was visiting the land with showers of revival blessing in that area of Scotland. Towns like Blairgowrie and Jedburgh were being visibly affected by the Spirit of God. Bonar's Diary refers to individuals who were being awakened and convicted at this time.

One Diary entry reads as follows:

'Sabbath 26th. – I had very great freedom all day, especially in the evening in praying and preaching upon 1 Peter 2:24; in the forenoon the people were very attentive and church very full; several were weeping, and two of the men I noticed specially, while I preached upon John 21:15-17. Some have got great relief from their anxiety; with others it continues'¹⁸.

As all would expect who know Scottish church history, the year 1843 was a very important and significant one for Bonar and his brethren. In May of this year at the General Assembly occurred the Disruption of the Church in Scotland. This led to the formation of a new and very large denomination called the Free Church of Scotland. We shall say more about this in a moment. But first in the same year we must take note of an event which came as a great shock to multitudes including the subject of this lecture.

THE DEATH OF ROBERT MURRAY M'CHEYNE

In March of that year, 1843, died Robert Murray M'Cheyne. Bonar and M'Cheyne had been together, as we have seen, since school days. They had later been together at university and later in Theological College. Later, though separated by a few miles, their respective ministries at Dundee and Collace had given them

¹⁷ Mission of Discovery, Christian Focus Ed., p.17.

¹⁸ Diary and Letters of AA Bonar, p.87.

opportunity, as we have already mentioned, to meet and to share their pulpits. Bonar's reaction to the death of his dear friend is expressed poignantly in his Diary in these words:

'Saturday, 25th. – This afternoon about five o'clock, a message has just come to tell me of Robert M'Cheyne's death. Never, never yet in all my life have I felt anything like this. It is a blow to myself, to his people, to the church of Christ in Scotland. O Lord, work for Thine own glory's sake. Arise, O Lord, the godly ceaseth and the faithful fail. My heart is sore. It makes me feel death is near myself now. Life has lost half its joys, were it not the hope of saving souls. There was no friend whom I loved like him. I have been feeling lately very much my evil neglect of privileges and opportunities, and my very small degree of holiness. This startles me. It is as if God were striking myself. Perhaps He may be taking me next. The same fever may come to me now, but the time at any rate is short. Rode down to Dundee as requested.

'Sunday, 26th. – O, what a night was Saturday! In coming to the town about nine [o'clock], the people had met for prayer in the church, and wished me to come up. I could scarce go, only I felt it was easier to weep with those that lamented such a minister. During prayer, the cries and lamentations of the people resounded through the church, as if their hearts were bursting'¹⁹.

Bonar's sense of loss at the sudden home-call of his friend followed him all his life. His Diary in after years makes repeated reference to this sad event. Nearly twenty years later, on October 15th 1864, his beloved wife Isabella was suddenly taken from him by death. She had been an excellent wife and help-meet to him. She passed away, as Bonar puts it, 'so gently...that I could scarcely believe it was death'²⁰. The next day after his wife's death he writes in the Dairy: 'Have

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.101.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.235.

been reading to the children Revelation 7. But oh, the shadow is deep! The Lord made Robert M'Cheyne's death a means of great blessing to me; may this [i.e., the death of my wife] not be less, is my prayer²¹. Then, a few lines later: 'Dear, dear Isabella was a most true, sincere unpretending believer. In small duties she was especially to be found careful and attentive...I have been thinking of her in glory...'²².

It should be mentioned at this point that at his death in 1892 Andrew Bonar left five of a family: one son, Dr James Bonar, of London; and four daughters, three of them unmarried. His eldest daughter was the wife of William Oatts of the Christian Institute²³. However one of his children, Andrew by name, died in childhood²⁴. It was of course Andrew Bonar who edited and prepared for publication the famous Memoir and Remains of RM M'Cheyne, which came out in a two-volume first edition in 1844, just one year after M'Cheyne's death. Bonar prepared a revised one-volume edition right at the end of his life in 1892²⁵.

THE MEMOIR OF M'CHEYNE

It is not possible to state with certainty how many copies of this book have been sold over the intervening years. I discovered a little note in a book about M'Cheyne entitled 'Robert Murray M'Cheyne – a View from the Pew' (1898), which states that by the time of the Glasgow Centenary celebrations in 1910 of Andrew Bonar, no less than 200,000 copies of the Memoir and Remains had been sold in this country. More than that number had by that date been sold in America. In all it was reckoned that, taking into account all the translations of it into other languages, not less than half a million

²¹ Ibid, p.235.

²² Ibid., p.235.

²³ Ferguson, p.232-3.

²⁴ Diary and Letters of AA Bonar, p.235.

²⁵ Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology, p.83.

copies in all had been put into circulation²⁶. Of course that figure would have to be revised upwards very considerably today. It is impossible to say how much M'Cheyne would have been known without Bonar. God put them both together that they might both be a blessing to us in after years.

It is interesting in itself to note here that in Glasgow in 1910 Centenary celebrations were held to mark the birth of Andrew Bonar as we now mark them two hundred years afterwards.

THE FREE CHURCH DISRUPTION

The second major event in 1843, as we earlier mentioned, was the Disruption. The great biblical principle behind the Disruption was that Christ alone is the Head of the Church. The evangelicals in the Church of Scotland had for ten years been contending for this principle against a dead formalism among many of the ministers and elders of the Church in the early nineteenth century. Together with the Headship of Christ was the principle that the people of a congregation have the right to call their own minister. The local patron or landowner has no right to overrule this 'Call' of the people.

At the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in May 1843 over four hundred and fifty ministers seceded to form the Free Church of Scotland. This Disruption was based on the evangelical view of the Bible that it alone is infallible and fully authoritative.

Andrew Bonar was one of the ministers who came out to form the new Free Church of Scotland. M'Cheyne had clearly shown that his sympathies were with the evangelicals. But his early death in March of 1843 came just two months before the crucial decision at the Assembly of that same year.

THE CHARACTER OF ANDREW BONAR'S MINISTRY

²⁶ A View from the Pew, Ambassador, Footnote to Preface.

Bonar's daughter Marjory wrote of her father's life and ministry that there was 'singular method and regularity in all his work'. 'He had a time for writing letters, for reading books, besides his hours for prayer and study of the Word. Old books were put away on remote shelves...marked in a way that shows they had all, at one time, been carefully read. How he found time for all he read, and wrote, and studied, it is difficult to say, but the hours of prayer, which nothing was allowed to hinder, made other duties as they came easy and light'²⁷. Marjory Bonar could refer to her father's life as a whole in these words: 'It is a revelation of the life of one who prayed always, who prayed everywhere, who, the nearer he came to the other world, was every day more constantly enjoying closer intercourse with it'²⁸.

BONAR'S LITERARY LABOURS

Andrew Bonar used his exceptional gifts to very good effect by devoting much time and energy to literary work. Mention has been made already of the 'Narrative of a Mission of Inquiry to the Jews from the Church of Scotland in 1839' (1842) and to the Memoir of M'Cheyne (1844). His other literary works include 'A Commentary on Leviticus' (1846); 'Christ and His Church in the Book of Psalms' (1859); 'Redemption Drawing Nigh' (1847); 'Memoir of David Sandeman' (1861); and 'Letters of Samuel Rutherford' (two vols., 1863). These 'Letters of Rutherford' were brought out by Bonar in a second, slightly revised edition in one volume in 1891²⁹.

RUTHERFORD'S LETTERS

Rutherford's Letters are among the most spiritually important writings of all time perhaps. There are in all 365 letters. Most were

²⁷ Diary and Letters of AA Bonar, Preface, p.xiv.

²⁸ Ibid., Preface, p.xiv.

²⁹ Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology, p.83.

written from Aberdeen where he was in exile for his non-conformity. They cover the years 1628-1661. In the year 1637 alone his Letters amount to 491 pages. The first edition was done in 1664 by Robert McWard in Rotterdam, Holland, because of persecution in Scotland at that date. There appear to have been as many as twenty-four previous editions of these Letters before Bonar's edition. Also prior to Bonar's edition it is known that there were editions in America, in Holland and in Germany. The deeply spiritual mind of Rutherford as we see it in the Letters was forever returning to the theme of Christ's love for His church, as His heavenly Bride, and our duty of love to Him. He longed for days of revival when Christ would again visit Scotland in blessing. I give just one example: 'Oh, let the King come! [He means of course Christ as King of nations]. Oh, let his kingdom come! Oh, let their eyes rot in their eye-holes, who will not receive him home again to reign and rule in Scotland!' (Letter 88, page 227, vol. 1).

It ought not to escape our attention that this Letter, penned as it was in 1637, was written just a few months before the profound spiritual movement throughout Scotland which we know as the National Covenant of 1638. Rutherford's longings for revival were thus to be wonderfully realized by God's grace within a few short months of these earnest entreaties in Letter 88. Indeed, it was in this very same year of 1637 in St Giles Church in Edinburgh that Jenny Geddes threw her stool at the bishop who was reading Laud's liturgy. Her words were to become famous as she remonstrated with the bishop for his new Prayer Book style of worship: 'Villain! Do you say mass in my lug [ear]?' This was the event which started the riot which led to the National Covenant in 1638 – the very next year after Rutherford had written his indignant Letter yearning for pure biblical religion to be established again in Scotland.

BONAR'S YEARS IN COLLAGE

Bonar's ministry in Collace, Perthshire, lasted from 1838-1856. It should be said that these years were years of much gospel blessing in many parts of Scotland. Perhaps the most powerful and amazing of the revivals in Scotland during the lifetime of Bonar was the great revival of 1859-60, which was just a little after this period, it is reckoned that in Scotland alone at this time some 300,000 souls were added to the churches as the fruit of God's gracious work in revival³⁰. The recently-formed Free Church of Scotland at that date was visibly a church full of love for Christ and of pure zeal for the spread of the gospel throughout various parts of the world. Churches were built, schools erected, missionary endeavours commenced and Christian books were written in this important era. Bonar played a vital part in these efforts.

BONAR IN GLASGOW

In 1856 Andrew Bonar received a call to go to Glasgow. He left the little town of Collace and was inducted into his new charge in the great city of Glasgow. The date was Thursday, December 4th of that year. In his Diary he writes: 'Lord, go forth with me. Today give me a baptism of the Holy Spirit that I may have new zeal, compassion, love to Thee and to souls...'³¹.

The location of this new church to which Bonar went in the city of Glasgow was Finnieston, a district just to the north of the river Clyde. It was a new mission charge, or outreach work. That Bonar's prayer in his Diary seeking God's blessing was fulfilled is clear from the sequel. When he began in Finnieston he had just ten people in the congregation. When he completed his ministry in 1892, by God's grace, he had about one thousand members. In the course of thirty-six or so years in this Glasgow church he lived to find the old building with which he started too small. A handsome new church

³⁰ The Fervent Prayer, J Edwin Orr, p.58: '...ten per cent of the population of three million...'

³¹ Diary and Letters of AA Bonar, p.181.

building was erected. It had at the front four classical Greek columns. The previous old building had now become 'too small for him'³². On the front of this new church building were carved in stone in Hebrew the famous words: 'He that winneth souls is wise'. It should be said that Bonar read both Hebrew and Greek with great fluency.

It is interesting to note that Bonar had the practice when preaching of 'cantillating'. This style of speech had been more common in previous times and was felt to be a little quaint and old-fashioned at that date by those who heard him. Apparently he had the old style of speaking in a kind of sing-song way. (Perhaps it resembled in some ways the Welsh 'hwyl'. But I may be guilty of speculation on this point).

The following Tribute appeared in the 'British Weekly' shortly after Bonar's death in 1892:

'When he went to Glasgow as the minister of a new mission charge, things were at first against him. His premillennialism, his mannerisms, and the weakness of his voice, prevented an immediate success. But no opposition could stand long against that affectionate, insistent, unwearying zeal, and in the end he gathered a church of a thousand members. Dr Bonar's whole mind was absorbed by an intense, simple, gospel; he was continually studying the Bible; and preaching came as natural to him as breathing. And he was always preaching or visiting, or doing something which bore directly in the summons of Christ to the human soul. Wherever he went he took a commendation of the Gospel, not only in his talk, which, whenever released, went straight to the one theme which was the master-light of all his day, but also by his sweet, humble and gracious spirit. Dr Bonar had certainly a touch of genius, and he was a scholar of the old type...'³³

³² Ferguson, p.77.

³³ Ibid., p.238.

Bonar's ministry in Glasgow was from 1856 to 1892, a period of some thirty-six years. In 1878 he was appointed Moderator of the Free Church of Scotland's Assembly which met at in Glasgow that year.

DL MOODY IN SCOTLAND

One event of great importance in the religious life of Scotland in these years was the coming of DL Moody to preach in Edinburgh and Glasgow. Bonar was one of the first ministers to welcome DL Moody and his singer Ira D Sankey. It may be remembered that Moody came three times to Scotland: in 1873-4, in 1881-2, and in 1891-2. There were controversial aspects to these visits. John Kennedy of Dingwall described the preaching of Moody as 'Hyper-Evangelism'. I do not wish to enter in the controversy here. Suffice to say that Andrew and Horatius Bonar lent their energies very fully to the missionary work of the American evangelists.

Dwight Lyman Moody was in fact the guest at Andrew Bonar's home in Glasgow. Moody later said to an American that Andrew Bonar was 'one of the two men who helped him most'³⁴.

Whatever view one takes of these Moody missions there is no denying that his preaching influenced hundreds and even thousands of persons in Scotland. There is surely truth in these words of Ian Hamilton: 'At a time when higher criticism was beginning to make its mark on academic theology in Scotland, Moody's mission seemed to bring a new lease of life and give a new confidence to the Scottish Church'³⁵. One of the Glasgow ushers in Moody's campaign was William Oatts, the son-in-law of Andrew Bonar. Oatts apparently kept the list of more than a hundred names of persons who had 'come forward' to profess their faith in Christ at

³⁴ Moody without Sankey, John Pollock, *Christian Focus*, p.130.

³⁵ *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, p.605.

this time³⁶.

It is hard to imagine how many persons were affected by Moody's preaching in these years 1873-5. John Pollock in his book 'Moody without Sankey' is able to use the following words as a heading to one of the chapters in his biography of Moody: 'Glasgow Conquered'. If that seems to be over-dramatic let us recall that on the final Lord's Day of the Moody campaign at this date the Great Western Road in Glasgow was 'black for three hours with a living stream of all sorts and conditions of men and women, mostly on foot'³⁷. Moody preached in the Glasgow Botanic Gardens 'from a box of a carriage to a crowd estimated at twenty or thirty thousand...the singing was unforgettable...it all appeared amazing'³⁸.

Andrew Bonar attended the crowded meetings which were held in the Free Church's Assembly Hall in Edinburgh. He writes: 'What a sight! Our great Assembly Hall crowded with eager, praying, listening souls from ten o'clock till four... This is the answer to the prayers since the Union strife was closed for revival and blessing... There has been much made of the 600,000 of Glasgow...my soul has begun to feel quickened and the days of 1839-40 and onwards come up to view. But there is more now than then'³⁹.

This painful reference in his Diary to 'Union strife' had in mind the debate in the Free Church at that date over whether or not to unite with the United Presbyterian denomination. This debate threatened to break the Free Church into two in 1873 but an adjustment was found and the threatened division did not take place till 1900, by which date Dr Bonar had gone to his eternal rest.

³⁶ Moody without Sankey, p.133.

³⁷ Ibid., p.138.

³⁸ Ibid., p.138.

³⁹ Diary and Letters of AA Bonar, p.301.

BONAR'S HOLIDAY OCCUPATION

Before we close this account of Dr Bonar's life let us look at the following happy picture of how he used to spend his time when on holiday:

'[He] never really took what could be called a complete holiday. His friends might advise him to rest for two months as his old age advanced, either at Tobermory [Mull] or Portpatrick [near Stranraer, SW Scotland], or the scenes latterly of his annual autumnal resorts, fancying that in such secluded spots he would have little temptation to exert himself or opportunity of speaking; but even at a farm-house, he would gather in all the servants and neighbours and hold *two services* on the Lord's Day. Besides so great was his celebrity that when it was known that he was to speak in the most unpretending fashion, scores and sometimes hundreds of people came from the surrounding regions. At Portpatrick the people will never forget how the aged saint stood in the open-air near the sea on the Sabbaths of his holiday, his son-in-law, Mr Oatts, in whose cooperation and fellowship he always greatly rejoiced, helping him with the singing, and the introductory exercises. We are certain that as the people now look back to these occasions they will be disposed to regard them as "Days of the Son of Man on the earth"⁴⁰.

THE CLOSING YEARS

In the year 1873 Andrew Bonar received the degree of Doctor of Divinity from Glasgow University. The work in Finnieston was being greatly blessed. He speaks of having a 'Communicants' Class of fifty-two'. Most of them, he writes, were 'very distinct in their account of their conversion'⁴¹. 'Every day for a fortnight', he writes in his Diary, 'there has been news of some one brought to faith in

⁴⁰ Ferguson, p.101.

⁴¹ Diary and Letters of AA Bonar, p.302.

Christ⁴².

But by the 1880s the passage of the years was beginning to tell. In 1886 he writes in his Diary: 'My brother Horace seems much stricken down in health'. A few days later he writes, 'I find there are only now ten Pre-Disruption ministers in full work'⁴³. The old generation of fine men was visibly passing away. Horatius Bonar died in 1889. Their brother John died in 1891 in his eighty-ninth year. Andrew was the last of these three brothers to go to his eternal rest to be with Christ, whom he had served faithfully for so many years. When he passed away he had been a Christian for some sixty-two years and a minister of the gospel for about fifty-four years. Like Job, he died 'old and full of days'.

I close with the account of his passage into glory and subsequent funeral as these events are briefly written by his daughter Marjory in her father's Diary:

'For a time his weakness and restlessness were very great; then he grew more quiet, and lay gently breathing his life away. At half-past ten he closed his eyes and fell asleep so quietly that those round his bed hardly knew when life was gone. A look of inexpressible peace, almost of delighted surprise, rested on his face, as if he had suddenly and unexpectedly found himself in the presence of his much-loved Lord and Master, with whom he had been walking all these years on earth, and who now 'received him into glory'.

On Wednesday, the 4th of January 1893 men and women and little children who loved him followed through the snow to Sighthill [Edinburgh] Cemetery, where he was laid to rest beside his wife and his little boy. Within sight of the great city where so long he lived and laboured, he lies waiting for the day of 'our gathering together to Him' – that day for which he longed and prayed'⁴⁴.

⁴² Ibid., p.302.

⁴³ Ibid., p.358-9.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.399.

LESSONS TO BE LEARNED FROM THE LIFE AND WORK OF ANDREW BONAR

1. A survey of the life of this man of God reminds us that if we are to do anything worthwhile for our Saviour in this world we must be whole-hearted, entirely devoted to Him and jealous of our time, so that nothing be wasted. Men who are prayerful, spiritual and thirsting for fellowship with God in Christ will not live in vain. We cannot give ourselves the gifts which God has not given to us already. But we can use our talents to the utmost of our capacity. Bonar and M'Cheyne were in several ways different but in one thing they were identical men. They lived wholly for God and in the interests of eternal values.
2. Again, a lesson that comes home to us from the life of Bonar is that we should cultivate love one to another as Christians and we should have a sincere and a burning desire to see sinners saved and brought to Christ. Other things in the ministry may have their place. But there is no substitute in a minister for evangelistic zeal and passion to win the lost and to bring them to the Lord Jesus Christ.
3. Bonar and M'Cheyne loved the Jewish people and sorrowed to think they were in darkness. Like Samuel Rutherford and many Puritans they cherished the confident hope that one day God would bring them to Christ as a nation. They would be grafted in again into their own olive tree, as Paul puts it. This prayer should be ours still today, and all the more so in that the Jews are now returning steadily to their ancestral homeland in Palestine and we have a still stronger hope that the day of their restoration is at hand. In that day, declares Christ, they will cry out, 'Blessed is he that cometh

in the name of the Lord’.

4. Life is short and death is sure. Those who are wise live well in the anticipation that very soon we must leave this scene of time and enter into eternity. Those who live well will die well. To live well means to live by the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ and in His service. To die well is to be ready with Paul to say, ‘I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous Judge will give me in that day: and not to me only’. May God help to us all to hear these vital lessons so that we may all meet at last in that blessed land above.