



## Articles and Sermons :: The impact of Robert Murray McCheyne -hudson

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### The impact of Robert Murray McCheyne

by J. Harrison Hudson

One hundred and fifty years ago there appeared briefly, in the Kirk and city of Dundee, a man considered by Christian people world-wide ever since to be a shining light and saint extraordinary. He was Robert Murray McCheyne.

Writing in 1843 a Mr Hamilton of Regent Square, London said of this poet, prophet and saint: "Whilst the possession of such a bright and shining light was the Church of Scotland's privilege, the rarity of such is the Church of Scotland's sin." Dr George Reid said as much in his article on "life style" in the September's Life and Work: "In the Church of Scotland saints are somewhat thin on the ground."

McCheyne's ministry was short. Inducted to the charge on November 24, 1836, at the age of 23, he died on March 25, 1843, at the age of 29. During an epidemic of typhus fever he was struck down while visiting sick people in the parish. Six years and four months!

Wet with tears

If his life and work was short his influence has been long. His sheer spiritual impact on the life of Dundee and Scotland has provoked Christian folk ever since to make what can only be described as a pilgrimage to the scene of his life, love and labours.

From the Commonwealth, the United States and Europe, visitors come in order to stand in the pulpit that is said to have been wet with his tears as he urged people to commit their lives to Christ. With reverence they stand with bowed head before the memorial stone which marks his grave.

His friend and biographer, Dr Andrew Bonar once said, "There is a fragrance about McCheyne's grave." Certainly pilgrims past and present agree. Perhaps it is hardly passing strange that today Robert Murray McCheyne is not well known in Dundee since "a prophet is not without honour save in his own country."

Brought up on the West coast of Scotland, as a young man and boy my knowledge of Dundee included Our Wullie, the Broons, jute, jam and journalism, and a former Dundee player, Billy Steel. But for as long as I can remember the two names most closely identified with Dundee, both heroes of the faith, have been Mary Slessor and Robert Murray McCheyne.

Brought up in Edinburgh, where his father was a lawyer, Robert Murray McCheyne distinguished himself at the Royal High School and Edinburgh University. While still at school he wrote his first poem on "Greece, but living Greece no more," and at university his poem "On the Covenanters" won the prize in the Moral Philosophy class. His poem "I am a debtor" appears as hymn number 582 in the Revised Church Hymnary:

When this passing world is done,  
When has sunk yon glaring sun,  
When we stand with Christ in glory,  
Looking o'er life's finished story,  
Then, Lord, shall I fully know -  
Not till then - how much I owe.

Chosen not for good in me,  
Wakened up from wrath to flee;  
Hidden in the Saviour's side,

By the Spirit sanctified,  
Teach me, Lord, on earth to show,  
By my love, how much I owe.

While at university it would appear that the young McCheyne, like the young Francis of Assisi, was fun-loving and pleasure seeking. The death of his brother David, a brilliant classical scholar and a Writer to the Signet, seems to have been the turning point in his life. David, a very religious man, was only 26 when he died. Robert, eight years his junior, had a tremendous admiration for David.

### Inner struggle

Following the death of David, as is the common manifestation of sinners on the road to sainthood, McCheyne's writings indicate a deep inner spiritual struggle with temptation, sin, and a longing for forgiveness.

Today, we might consider it guilt ridden and morbid when he writes on May 21, 1834: "This day I have attained my twenty-first year. Oh, how long and worthlessly I have lived, Thou only knowest." Since sin is no longer a fashionable notion, and in these enlightened times we have excised it from human consciousness, no doubt behavioural scientists would regard the young McCheyne as deeply disturbed and suffering from some form of extreme neurosis.

The language used to describe McCheyne's saintliness by his biographer, Dr Bonar, has a kind of Beulah land cadence to it that would hardly commend itself to us today, but the historical facts couched within it are beyond dispute.

In the 1830s Dundee was a boom town. When jute replaced flax, the city's fame spread throughout the commercial world, but in the manner of prophets and saints, McCheyne was not very impressed and his description is not very flattering: "A city given to idolatry and hardness of heart."

However, McCheyne settled down to work in the parish of St Peter's with a burning conviction that the Spirit of God would work mightily in hard hearts. His sentiments are summed up in the following words:

Give me a man of God the truth to preach,  
A house of prayer within convenient reach,  
Seat-rents the poorest of the poor can pay,  
A spot so small one pastor can survey:  
Give these - and give the Spirit's genial shower,  
Scotland shall be a garden all in flower.

While he was on a "Mission of Inquiry to the Jews," motivated by a deep concern for them as the people of the Covenant, a profound spiritual awakening took place in Dundee under the ministry of the locum, Mr William C. Burns. On his return McCheyne was confronted by a dramatically changed situation; the spiritual manifestation for which he had worked and prayed had happened while he was abroad.

Night after night St Peter's would be packed to the extent that many had to stand in the aisles and sit on the pulpit steps while the crowd outside was unable to gain entry. In order to accommodate the crowds it became necessary to hold services in the open air.

### Spiritual revival

During this time both public and private prayer meetings were started on impulse, even the children conducted their own prayer meetings. On his return from Palestine, McCheyne found 39 prayer meetings, five of them conducted by children for children. Prayer groups continued to proliferate in the city and in the factories.

A grass-roots spiritual awakening, or revival as some would describe it, had come to Dundee. It is generally conceded that the revival was due to the prophetic preparation and saintliness of Robert Murray McCheyne.

Revival seems to be predicated on certain spiritual elements which include prayer, personal piety manifested in a life of holiness, prophetic preaching, the participation and practice of worship as a regular priority, and the easy conversation of spiritual interests without embarrassing self-consciousness.

Depending on your point of view, revivals and ecclesiastical fights can look remarkably similar. The Reformation and the Disruption can be interpreted as a spiritual awakening of true religion or the unedifying spectacle of an ecclesiastical battle of the first magnitude leaving the church rent asunder. It is all according to your position in the ecclesiastical spectrum.

Dr Andrew Herron had a point when he wrote of the Kirk, "We may not have enough life to start a revival; we've certainly enough life to start a fight." Doubtless this is why revivals are not universally welcome.

Invariably revivals are accompanied by disturbance, suspicion and downright scepticism, and so it has been ever since the happening in Acts 2 when some observers reacted in bewilderment and opined, "These people are drunk." Revivals give rise to supernatural phenomena which cause some people to feel uncomfortable, even in the Church.

Admittedly some people, out of misguided enthusiasm, have made exaggerated claims from time to time, which were not substantiated by the facts. No doubt this is why Dr Andrew Bonar writes of the Dundee revival: "Many believers doubted, and the ungodly raged." At the time the local press published a lively correspondence for and against revival. It begs the question, are revivals inherently disruptive?

The fundamental need of the Church and Nation today is a spiritual awakening which will galvanise the people in our pews and parishes to return to an active, vigorous and vital experience of God's grace in Christ. So many have fallen away from the first love to Jesus Christ that it needs to be quickened, renewed and restored, so that it may issue in holiness of life and work.

#### Fruits of revival

The results of revival are both startling and striking. In worship there is a disregard for time while leisure and pleasure pursuits are postponed or abandoned. People experience greater spiritual intensity and a deeper fellowship with God and each other.

Ours is a different age and Robert Murray McCheyne may seem a slightly antiquated figure, but his saintliness still burns bright a century and a half on. Extravagant it may seem, but many would agree with one contemporary of McCheyne who wrote of the great saint: "Whether viewed as a son, a brother, a friend, or a pastor, he was the most faultless and attractive exhibition of the true Christian which we had ever seen embodied in a living form."

Had he not died on the eve of the Disruption he would certainly, along with such luminaries as Welsh and Chalmers, have been a leading light in the Free Kirk. The Kirk today could do with a few saints of the calibre of life and holiness of Robert Murray McCheyne.

God grant that the same Spirit which worked mightily through Robert Murray McCheyne all these years ago may also work through us today that the fire of revival may again fan into an inextinguishable flame of life and burn to the glory of God and the renewal of our beloved Kirk.

**Re: The impact of Robert Murray McCheyne -hudson - posted by sermonindex (), on: 2006/12/5 22:55**

Here are 2 pictures of M'Chynes Church:

[Image: [http://www.stpeters-dundee.org.uk/images/pic\\_churchinterior\\_front.jpg](http://www.stpeters-dundee.org.uk/images/pic_churchinterior_front.jpg)]

This is a picture of the pulpit he preached from:

[Image: [http://www.stpeters-dundee.org.uk/images/pic\\_mccheyne\\_pulpit.jpg](http://www.stpeters-dundee.org.uk/images/pic_mccheyne_pulpit.jpg)]

<http://www.stpeters-dundee.org.uk/history.htm>

Here is a quote from M'Cheyne that might show why he had such effect in his only **7 1/2** years of ministry dying at 29 years

ars old:

"Get your texts from God - your thoughts, your words, from God... It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God. A word spoken by you when your conscience is clear, and your heart full of God's Spirit, is worth ten thousand words spoken in unbelief and sin."

**Re: The impact of Robert Murray McChesney -hudson - posted by Tears\_of\_joy, on: 2006/12/5 22:58**

"A number of years after his death for instance, a minister came to visit his church at St. Peter's church. And the caretaker agreed to show him around that famous kirk. As they were walking around the church they were discussing about the late beloved pastor of Dundee McChesney, and the visitor was particularly anxious to discover the reason for the young man's success as a preacher. 'What do you think' he said to the caretaker, 'is the secret of McChesney's great ministry? what was the secret of the power in the pulpit?' The caretaker looked at the minister, he said nothing for a moment but he just conducted the minister into the vestry. Now he said, 'kneel down by the chair' and the somewhat amused minister knelt by the chair. And in a most solemn tone the caretaker said: 'Now then.. start to weep. raise your eyes to heaven and cry to God. Ohh God bless me! Ohh God use me! OHH GOD I cannot go up to yonder pulpit until I know I have the mighty anointing of the Spirit resting upon me.' And looking into the face of that visiting preacher with tear filled eyes the caretaker said: 'That dear friend is the secret of the ministry of Robert Murray McChesney, He was a man of prayer.'"