

“Live so as to be missed.”¹
How the Gospel Shaped the Life and Ministry of
Robert Murray M’Cheyne

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Three Main Works consulted:

- Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of R.M. M’Cheyne (Banner of Truth)* [Memoir]
- Andrew Bonar, *Robert Murray M’Cheyne (Banner of Truth)* [M’Cheyne]
- LJ Van Valen in *Constrained by His Love: A New Biography on Robert Murray M’Cheyne* (Christian Focus, 2002) [Valen]

I have heard it said that often what pours out of a man in the dementia of old age is what he has been storing up through life. All the normal guards fail and the mouth speaks from the heart. If that is true, I wonder how comfortable we would be having a sudden injury or illness open a portal to our soul?

At a mere 29 years of age, Robert M’Cheyne lay in the throes of typhus fever. Quickly the dementia set in and he spent his last two days on earth... praying, preaching, evangelizing and quoting Scripture. Only there was no congregation present – just Dr. Gibson and an attendant.

“Thus he continued most generally engaged while the delirium lasted, either in prayer or in preaching to his [imaginary] people, and always apparently in happy frame, till the morning of Saturday the 25th.”²

This was a fitting close to a remarkable life. The authenticity of how the Gospel had changed M’Cheyne was perhaps never more clearly seen.

How has the Gospel changed you? The reality is, we can fill up our lives with idolatry, sexual immorality, pride, covetousness and discontentment – and still preach decent enough sermons. What M’Cheyne understood was the reality of Judgment Day, especially the stricter judgment awaiting teachers, and his only hope before God in that great day was Jesus Christ! The Good News that Jesus Christ had died for his sins and had been resurrected was the core from which everything in his life emanated. He could not suffer to live one way before men and another way before God. For him, it all started and ended before God. He lived a life centred around the Gospel.

A Brief Biography

Robert Murray M’Cheyne was born 21 May 1813 at Edinburgh to Adam M’Cheyne (b. 1781, d. 1854) an Edinburgh lawyer and Lockhart Murray Dickson (b.1772, d. 1854). He lived as most young men of his age, albeit with a certain sense of decorum suitable to his position. He enjoyed dancing and parties and the pleasant company of young women. He was a top student,

¹ M’Cheyne, 190.

² M’Cheyne, 190. He died on 25 March 1843.

not a bad artist (many of his sketches have been published in various works), athletic and with a native winsomeness that likely would have led to his success in any endeavour. Such was the trajectory of his life until his brother, David, passed into eternity in July 1831 at the age of 26.

This was the start of God's real work on the 18-year-old Robert. David had been a faithful evangelist of Robert, praying for his worldly younger brother, witnessing to him of the Gospel of grace and living a transformed life before him. He was, by all counts, a sincere and earnest man.

Robert loved David, but had pleasantly ignored his warnings and appeals. Watching David die in peace began to break his hard heart. Not long after David's death, Robert began reading a small book popular at the time called, *Sum of Saving Knowledge*. This short exposition of John 6:37 called on men to turn to Christ and "thus the young M'Cheyne was brought into contact with the heart of the Gospel."³ Never sure of the exact moment of his conversion, M'Cheyne would freely point to this time period as when the first breaths of life appeared.

His course took a turn and a joyful seriousness took over his persona. He started to reform his life and as he did the Gospel came more and more into focus. As a student, he lived for Jesus and his desire for God in Christ shot upwards.

"It is far better to be *with* Christ than to be *in* Christ"⁴

"Oh, to have Brainerd's heart for perfect holiness - to be holy as God is holy - pure as Christ is pure - perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect."⁵

In 1831 M'Cheyne enrolled in the divinity hall of the University of Edinburgh. It was a good time to be there. The great Thomas Chalmers was in the prime of his ministry and "exercised the greatest influence on M'Cheyne."⁶ Chalmers sway was in teaching M'Cheyne the simplicity of faith. In a culture that was marked by paralysis-by-analysis, Chalmers championed the simplicity of resting on the promises of Christ. No doubt this bore fruit in M'Cheyne's ministry, as he would often instruct those awakened to sin and salvation:

"It is a good thing to be shown much of the deceitfulness and desperate wickedness of your heart, provided it lead you to the Lord Jesus, that He may pardon and subdue it."⁷

"Now do not look so long and so harassingly at your own heart and feelings. What will you find there but the bite of the serpent?... Look to Christ... Look to Him and live. You need no preparation, you need no endeavors, you need no duties, you need no strivings, you only need to look and live... Do not take up your time so much with studying your own heart as with studying Christ's heart. 'For one look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ!'"⁸

"Only believe. Give unlimited credit to our God."⁹

³ Valen, 55.

⁴ Memoir 287. Italics added.

⁵ Memoir, 289.

⁶ Valen, 80.

⁷ Memoir, 308.

⁸ Memoir, 279.

⁹ Memoir, 286.

M'Cheyne was preaching from his own experience. At some point in those early days of preparation he had gone from knowing *about* Jesus to *knowing* Him personally, and the world was made a better place for it.

After successfully completing his four years of training he was licensed to preach in 1835. As was the custom of the day, he took up the role of an assistant to Mr. John Bonar, preaching every week at one of the two charges, praying for the saints and visiting house to house with the Gospel of life.¹⁰ Ten months later he would take up his first and only charge at St Peter's, Dundee.

His eight years of faithful service would soon fill the 1,100-seat building with genuinely converted souls. St. Peter's was an alive church marked by an authentic humility and quick service among the members. It was also something of an *avant garde* work, being so new that M'Cheyne was able to try measures that an older work saddled with traditions could not attempt.¹¹

The only two difficulties facing the work were the awakened-yet-unconverted souls attending the meetings and the health of the pastor. M'Cheyne laboured tirelessly among his flock and parish, preaching the Gospel of Jesus daily and from house to house. But so many souls to care for by an ever-sickening pastor, led to a long absence from the Dundee pulpit.

M'Cheyne suffered from heart palpitations and the only known cure at the time was bed rest.¹² He was ordered by doctors to leave Dundee immediately and seek peace and rest elsewhere. In God's providence, he ended up back at the family home in Edinburg in the winter of 1838-1839 and wrote to an acquaintance at the time:

"I sometimes think that a great blessing may come to my people in my absence. Often God does not bless us when we are in the midst of our labours, lest we shall say, 'My hand and my eloquence have done it.' He removes us into silence, and then pours 'down a blessing so that there is no room to receive it;' so that all that see it cry out, 'It is the Lord!' This was the way in the South Sea Islands. May it really be so with my dear people!"¹³

His words proved prophetic. While in Edinburg, he was approached by church leaders to join a party making inquiry into the spiritual state of those living in Israel. In a few short weeks, with the blessing of his medical advisors and the acquiescence of the elders of St. Peter's, the young pastor set off with Andrew Bonar and others for the Promised Land.

Time does not permit a detailed look at that excursion, but he eventually returned to Dundee in better health in November 1839. And what he came back to was a church that had been visited by God in his absence. Rather than cry foul, M'Cheyne rejoiced in God's goodness to his parish,

¹⁰ M'Cheyne, 54. This John Bonar was the brother of Andrew, M'Cheyne's best friend and first biographer. (John was also the name of Andrew's father who died when he was 11 years old.)

¹¹ This was primarily in the area of a lay eldership.

¹² A fast or irregular heartbeat.

¹³ M'Cheyne, 101-102.

and even observed specific days where he had lain near to death, praying in a foreign land, while God was pouring out His Spirit on Dundee:

“Mr. M’Cheyne listened with deepest interest to the accounts given of what had taken place in Dundee during the month of August, when he lay at the gates of death in Bouja.”¹⁴

Thus, he took up his work with greater thankfulness than ever before and sought to capitalize on this season of Revival. The rapid heart rate returned at seasons, but by reducing some duties and being careful with his commitments he was able to continue preaching and praying and calling men to Christ for another four years. In fact, it was while in the act of serving his people in this way that he contracted the Typhoid that would transfer him from this life to the next.

Andrew Bonar wrote in his journal:

March 25. "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 near myself now....There was no friend whom I loved like him." ¹⁵

For the next 49 years, Bonar would pause on this date to reflect on the life of his friend and often bemoan his great lack of godliness in comparison to M’Cheyne.

What can we learn from this young man in his short life? What do his words and actions teach and model to us of connecting the Gospel to our lives and ministries?

Lessons for Us From a Gospel-Centred Life

1. The Gospel, properly applied, is the only way to deal with our sin.

“I often pray, ‘Lord, make me as holy as a pardoned sinner can be made.’”¹⁶

Several months after his death, M’Cheyne’s dearest earthly friend, Andrew Bonar, published his first edition of the *Memoir and Remains*. That book included M’Cheyne’s private work, *Reformation*.¹⁷ Likely stimulated by his reading of Edwards’ *Resolutions*, M’Cheyne recorded a series of similar sounding personal directives in order to spur on his spiritual growth.¹⁸

¹⁴ M’Cheyne, 133.

¹⁵ Cited from <http://www.newblehome.co.uk/bonar/biography1.html>. Bonar lived another 49 years after M’Cheyne’s death and died on New Year’s Eve, 1892.

¹⁶ M’Cheyne, 185.

¹⁷ It seems certain M’Cheyne had no desire for *Reformation* to be published. Bonar quotes an unnamed minister who wisely noted that if it was a snare to be famous, it was a far “more subtle and dangerous snare... to be famed for holiness” (M’Cheyne, 173). This adds a twist to what may be the most famous M’Cheyne quote: “It is not great talents that God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God” (Memoir, 282). Holiness cannot be sought after as a means to fame.

¹⁸ Everyone ought to read Edwards’ *70 Resolutions*. There are lots of sites that have them, like <http://www.apuritansmind.com/christianwalk/ResolutionsOfJonathanEdwards.htm>

These statements reflect a deep understanding of his own heart, along with a vibrant desire to be like Jesus in everything. They are not an outline of self-absorbed acts of penance, precisely because they are so Gospel-saturated. They are the *application* of the Gospel, the *connection* of the Gospel to his life.

So, M'Cheyne begins by stating the why and how he ought deal with sin in his life:

“I am persuaded that I shall obtain the highest amount of present happiness, I shall do the most for God’s glory and the good of man, and I shall have the fullest reward in eternity, by maintaining a conscience always washed in Christ’s blood...”¹⁹

He then notes a certain tendency in his heart to carry a burdened conscience rather than confess a sin, and how this only adds to sin when forgiveness and cleansing are free and available in Jesus. So he resolves:

“I feel, when I have sinned, an immediate reluctance to go to Christ. I am ashamed to go. I feel as if it would do no good to go – as if it were making Christ a minister of sin, to go straight from the swine-trough to the best robe – and a thousand other excuses; but I am persuaded they are all lies, direct from hell. John argues the opposite way – ‘If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father;’ Jeremiah 3:1 and a thousand other scriptures are against it. I am sure there is neither peace nor safety from deeper sin, but in going directly to the Lord Jesus Christ. This is God’s way of peace and holiness. It is folly to the world and the beclouded heart, but it is *the way*.”²⁰

What M'Cheyne is doing here is preaching the Gospel to his own heart; he is working to establish a pattern of quickly realizing the only recourse for any sin is the cross. If every heart is an idol-factory, then certainly every heart is also a works-manufacturer. Before God graciously saved us we were, like all men, trusting in the things we did to secure favour from our deity. And the residue of this thinking gets stirred into life with every sin committed as a true Christian.

M'Cheyne realized that a failure to confess sin as sin and to acknowledge the efficacy of Jesus’ cross in propitiating God’s just wrath for that sin would always lead to denial or works or both. He came to practise what every minister of the Gospel must practise if he is to root out the “thousand forms of indwelling sin”²¹ and become a living epistle of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He applied the Gospel to his sin.

There is a terrible danger of labouring to make others better than we are by neglecting this discipline. Most of us have met a proud pastor – usually in the mirror! And clearly one of the causes of this ministerial arrogance is justifying our sin rather than confessing it. Such rationalizing and excusing will eventually soothe the conscience, but it will do nothing to make Christ great.

¹⁹ M'Cheyne, 174.

²⁰ M'Cheyne, 176. Emphasis his.

²¹ M'Cheyne, 173.

Brother, learn from this young pastor to connect the Gospel to your sin. There is no other way to progress in this spiritual life than constantly returning to the cross for grace and forgiveness. Preaching a better sermon will not make you more justified!

Perhaps the closeness of M'Cheyne to His Saviour and the attendant godliness this produced in his own life was caused more by his "ten looks to Christ" than anything else? In a day when we are urged to ignore sin, we would do well to learn from this pastor the value in identifying it and finding forgiveness for it.

It is no surprise that in considering how to improve his private prayer, M'Cheyne urged upon himself the duty of *habitual* confession of sin: "...surely a day should not pass without some space being devoted to [it]."²²

Is it a part of your daily routine to carefully confess sin and then to apply the Gospel to it?

2. The Gospel, properly applied, is a wrecking ball to pride.

One of the most striking ways the Gospel shaped M'Cheyne was in the development of his deep humility. Although no Whitefield when it came to crowds and fame, M'Cheyne was revered by a lot of people. In fact, there are many instances of him scolding others for putting more confidence in him than in God.

"A minister will make a poor saviour in the day of wrath. It is not knowing a minister or loving one or hearing one... that will save. You need to have your hand on the head of the Lamb for yourselves... I fear I will need to be a swift witness against many of my people in the day of the Lord, that they looked to me, and not to Christ, when I preached to them."²³

O for more of this kind of language from the pulpits of our day! O for more of it from our hearts! M'Cheyne's careful considerations of all that Christ is and had done for him made it profoundly clear who was the Person of real value. The excellencies and riches of Jesus were his treasure and his meditation, so it was ludicrous to him to think of someone finding life in a mere pastor.

Yet how often I am tempted to think that I really do have the answers people need. How many times I have failed to point one of His sheep to Him, because I have been too busy directing them to me. There is no greater leveler of pride than the cross. In what may be the most direct passage on Christian humility (Philippians 2), the Gospel takes centre stage. I am suggesting that there was a direct link between M'Cheyne's humility and that Gospel.

This is profound. We often cry out for revival – could it be it does not come because we desire to be at the centre of it and to receive much glory in it? Is our greater desire to be remembered in the history books rather than remembered by the Lord? That such a young man could process things in this way is a testimony to the great grace of God. Do we, like M'Cheyne, long for

²² M'Cheyne, 181.

²³ M'Cheyne, 104-105.

blessing and reviving for *their* good, before our own? If not, then we need to cry out for more grace.

“He was well aware how easily the flock begin to idolize the shepherd and how prone the shepherd is to feel somewhat pleased with this sinful partiality of his people and to be lifted up [made proud] by his success.”²⁴

So he did all he could to put pride to death. He looked to the cross.

This was no more clearly seen than in the well-attested revival that took place in his church while he was in Palestine. The very event he had laboured over in prayer, preached for and longed to see fall upon his people *while he was struggling to stay alive in a foreign land*. When he returned to Dundee, the great harvest had been mostly taken in. And all of this under the preaching ministry of the younger and less-experienced W.C. Burns. Yet, there is no hint of envy in either his public words or private writings. Bonar comments:

“He had no envy at another instrument having been so honoured in the place where he himself had laboured with many tears and temptations. In true Christian magnanimity, he rejoiced that the work of the Lord was done, by whatever hand. [He was] full of praise and wonder...”²⁵

In fact,

“It was during the time of Mr. M’Cheyne’s sore sickness that his flock in Dundee were receiving blessing from the opened windows of heaven.”²⁶

He later wrote to Dr. Gibson of this event:

“I really believed that my Master had called me home, and that I would sleep beneath the dark green cypresses of Bouja till the Lord shall come... and my most earnest prayer was for my dear flock, that God would give them a pastor after his own heart.”²⁷

The only explanation for this is the Gospel. M’Cheyne preached it to his heart daily and it brought him low.

"Oh to have Brainerd's heart for perfect holiness - to be holy as God is holy - pure as Christ is pure - perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect."

3. The Gospel, properly applied, will make God more important than sleep.

“Do everything in earnest; if it is worth doing, then do it with all your might. Above all, keep much in the presence of God. Never see the face of man till you have seen His face who is our life, our all.”²⁸

²⁴ M’Cheyne, 101.

²⁵ M’Cheyne, 135.

²⁶ M’Cheyne, 128.

²⁷ M’Cheyne, 127. I believe Bouja is an antiquated place name in Lebanon?

²⁸ Valen, 73. This a quote from a letter he wrote to a young student.

"Rose early to seek God and found Him whom my soul loves. Who would not rise early to meet such company?"²⁹

It does not take much study of history to note that the great men of God were men of personal devotion and prayer. M'Cheyne's love for the Saviour never showed any withering. The Gospel was so real to him and so central to his daily life that every day was a gift from God to pursue relationship with Jesus.

He was so convinced of his own inability that he dared not move forward without His gracious Enabler:

"I must first see the face of God before I take on any duty."³⁰

"We must be drinking the living water from the smitten rock or we cannot speak of its refreshing power."³¹

I think this practise was so consistent in his life because he held no doubts that only Christ could save. The truths behind John 15:5 oriented his life: "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." M'Cheyne had learned that...

"It is not great talents that God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God."³²

In a day and age when we are tempted to trust in program over providence, M'Cheyne's example is a healthy corrective. What we need is God. And keeping the Gospel at the centre of our thinking is the primary means to this. The Gospel is a daily refresher course on 1) What I deserve, and 2) What I have been given. It is a regular strike against all hints of self-reliance and drives a man to look for the face of God.

"But in general it is best to have at least one hour alone with God, before engaging in any thing else. At the same time, I must be careful not to reckon communion with God by minutes or hours, or by solitude. I have pored over my Bible, and on my knees for hours, with little or no communion; and my times of solitude have been often times of greatest temptation."³³

Brother, are you pursuing God on your own? Not for sermons or conversation, but for His glorious value and fame? Losing sight of the Gospel will allow sinful self-reliance to spread and soon our Bibles will transform from lifeline to encyclopedia. God be merciful to us!

²⁹ M'Cheyne, 30.

³⁰ M'Cheyne, 165.

³¹ Memoir, 398.

³² Memoir, 282.

³³ Memoir, 157.

4. The Gospel, properly applied, will make you pray.

“No person can be a child of God without living in secret prayer; and no community of Christians can be in a lively condition without unity in prayer.”³⁴

M’Cheyne and a small group of other pastors throughout Scotland made a pact to pray for each other every Saturday night. Along with praying for the work of God in other places, he was a faithful interceder for his own flock at Dundee. Asked by Bonar in the height of his busyness as a pastor and preacher if he had ever neglected these prayers, M’Cheyne answered in the negative. “What would my people do if I were not to pray?”³⁵

Most of us find our private prayer and Bible reading wanes as our other responsibilities increase. But M’Cheyne lived as Luther or Calvin, unwilling to march into battle without having first stood in the armory of God. His life appears a model of godliness next to mine, but he did not begin the ministry as a praying man in his own estimation. In his riveting ordination sermon for friend P. L. Miller, he said:

“If you do not pray, God will probably lay you aside from your ministry, as He did me, to teach you to pray.”³⁶

Rather than spending sick days and night lost in a haze of self-pity, M’Cheyne saw these times as opportunities to confess sin and seek God.

“I have been often brought very low, but it has been always good for me. In this way God educates his ministers...”³⁷

“When I was laid aside from the ministry, I felt it was to teach me the need of prayer for my people. I used often to say, Now God is teaching me the use of prayer...”³⁸

I would argue that the real connection here was not between *sickness* and prayer, but between the *Gospel* and prayer. M’Cheyne was quick to examine his own life for sin whenever illness befell him, and that introspection would again lead him to the cross. Gospel men are praying men. And they are quick to point others in the same direction, like Pilgrim, having come safely through the Valley of the Shadow of Death by use, not of the sword by which he fought off Apollyon, but of his other weapon, All-Prayer.³⁹ So M’Cheyne would preach and counsel:

“Pray to be taught to pray. Do not be content with old forms that flow from the lips only. Most Christians have need to cast their formal prayers away, to be taught to cry, Abba.”⁴⁰

" I trust that you... have often such times as Jacob had at Mahanaim, when the angels of God met him,—or such times as that at Peniel, when God had to cry out, " Let me go, for

³⁴ Memoir, 275.

³⁵ M’Cheyne, 63.

³⁶ Memoirs, 407.

³⁷ Memoirs, 275.

³⁸ Memoirs, 281.

³⁹ The Pilgrim’s Progress, 67.

⁴⁰ Memoir, 295.

the day breaketh." Alas, we do not weary God now with our wrestlings, but with our sins."⁴¹

And as if to remind himself of the value of prayer, he one day journaled:

"If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room, I would not fear a million of enemies. Yet the distance makes no difference; He is praying for me."⁴²

5. The Gospel, properly applied, will make all people precious in your sight – especially children.

One of the characteristics of M'Cheyne I found most attractive was his love for children. He knew the children in his parish by name, would often speak to them about the condition of their souls, could laugh with them in the streets and was careful to address them in his sermons. He also wrote them letters and even produced evangelistic tracts for their reading. This activity was so constant in his ministry that Valen asks: "Who is able to count the number of boys and girls that he might have led to Jesus?"⁴³ And this attention was not one-sided: "How the children loved their pastor!"⁴⁴

He would regularly address the children in his sermons. In one particular message he was preaching on the sword of God's revenge and in his application appealed to the little ears before him:

"Think this, little children, you are the pride of your mother's heart, but have gone astray from the womb, speaking lies. Little children who are fond of your plays, but are not fond of coming to Jesus Christ, who is the Saviour of little children, the sword will come on you also."⁴⁵

In a Gospel tract entitled, *Reasons Why Children Should Fly to Christ Without Delay*, he writes:

"It is high time you seek the Lord. The longest lifetime is short enough... Oh, if you had to stand as often as I have beside the dying bed of little children – to see their wild looks and outstretched hands, and to hear their dying cries – you would see how needful it is fly to Christ now. It may be your turn next. Are you prepared to die? Have you fled for refuge to Jesus? Have you found forgiveness?"⁴⁶

He was a wonderfully consistent paedo-baptist! One night a grieving parent knocked at his door to request he come and baptize his dying child.

"He knew that neither this man nor his wife ever entered the door of a church ; but he rose and went with him to the miserable dwelling. There an infant lay, apparently dying ; and many of the female neighbours, equally depraved with the parents, stood round.

⁴¹ Memoir, 283.

⁴² Memoir, 154.

⁴³ Valen, 185.

⁴⁴ Valen, 344.

⁴⁵ Valen, 215.

⁴⁶ Memoir, 586.

He came forward to where the child was, and spoke to the parents of their ungodly state and fearful guilt before God, and concluded by showing them that, in such circumstances, he would consider it sinful in him to administer baptism to their infant. They said, "He might at least do it for the sake of the poor child." He told them that it was not baptism that saved a soul, and that out of true concern for themselves he must not do as they wished. The friends around the bed then joined the parents in upbraiding him as having no pity on the poor infant's soul! He stood among them still, and showed them that it was they who had been thus cruel to their child; and then lifted up his voice in solemn warning, and left the house amid their ignorant reproaches."⁴⁷

Such actions and appeals may sound strange to our ears, but M'Cheyne was only applying the Gospel to the state of the children in his parish.

"The greatest want in the religion of children is generally sense of sin...; we are so often deceived by promising appearances in childhood."⁴⁸

So he would write to his Sunday School workers:

"Use a few spare half-hours in seeking after the lambs on the weekdays."⁴⁹

If we rightly understand the Gospel, and are regularly connecting the Gospel to all of life and ministry, it strikes me that speaking to children about their souls will be one of the natural outcomes. Do you address the children under your care? Do you see yourself just as responsible for their souls as for the souls of adults? Do you understand the Gospel and the need for childhood conversion? Do you pray for them, address them in your sermons and know how to have Gospel conversations with them?

Do you play with them? M'Cheyne once saw some boys playing on a suspended bar. He grabbed on to show them some of his gymnastic techniques and was doing quite well until the bar broke in two and he landed on his head! Such may be the cost of ministry to children.⁵⁰

6. The Gospel, properly applied, will give you somewhere to go and something to say to those fighting sin.

Pastors are often pressured to turn over difficult cases to professionals or those "trained to deal with the issues," but M'Cheyne is a model for us of how to apply the Gospel in counseling situations.

To one that was struggling to fight sin and feeling discouraged in the battle he wrote:

"God makes that covenant with you, when He brings you to lay hold on Jesus as your Surety – you curse-bearing, law-fulfilling Surety. Then you are brought in the bond of the everlasting covenant, and all its blessings are yours – pardon, righteousness,

⁴⁷ M'Cheyne, 87.

⁴⁸ Valen, 185.

⁴⁹ Reference lost.

⁵⁰ Actually, some speculate that this injury which turned out to be rather serious may have hastened his early death.

consolation, grace upon grace, life, love, the spirit of supplications – all are yours, and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.”⁵¹

Are we afraid to trust that the Gospel will provide “everything pertaining to life and godliness?” I commend to you M’Cheyne’s letters to school you in the art of careful pastoral Gospel application. He followed in the footsteps of the best Puritans and as Tim Keller recently said, “In many ways the Puritans are an excellent ‘laboratory’ for studying biblical counseling, because they are not influenced by any secular models of psychology.”⁵²

For example, to one reeling in depression, M’Cheyne advised:

“If you cannot find out the cause, ask Him to tell it you. Get it washed in the blood of Jesus. Then get it subdued (Micah 7:19). None but the Lord Jesus can either pardon or subdue. Remember not to rest in a state of desertion... and yet do not think that you have some great thing to do before regaining peace with God, The work on which peace is given has all been done by Jesus for us... Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every on that believeth.”⁵³

This, my friend, is applying the soul-saving Gospel to life.

7. The Gospel, properly applied, will make you an evangelist, or at least cause you to do the work of one.

Bonar wrote of M’Cheyne:

Our object is not to get duty done, but to get souls saved. 2 Cor. 8:7, Mr M’Cheyne used to go forth in this spirit; and often after visiting from house to house for several hours, he would return to some room in the place in the evening, and preach to the gathered families. “*September 26, 1838.*—Good visiting-day. Twelve families; many of them go nowhere. It is a great thing to be well furnished by meditation and prayer before setting out; it makes you a far more full and faithful witness. Preached in A.F.’s house on Job, ‘I know that my Redeemer liveth’ Very sweet and precious to myself.”⁵⁴

“Do not be satisfied without conversion.”⁵⁵

“Never forget that the end of a sermon is the salvation of the people.”⁵⁶

M’Cheyne had that uncanny Baxter-esque skill of getting into an unbeliever’s heart. In witnessing to one who was “awakened, but not yet converted,” he wrote:

“What has the world done for you, that you love it so much? Did the world die for you? Will the world blot out your sins or change your heart? Will the world carry you to

⁵¹ Memoirs, 309.

⁵² Cited on June 7 from <http://www.ccef.org/puritan-resources-biblical-counseling>

⁵³ Memoir, 328.

⁵⁴ M’Cheyne, 73.

⁵⁵ Memoir, 406.

⁵⁶ Memoir, 329.

heaven? No, no! You may go back to the world if you please, but it can only destroy your poor soul... Have you not lived long enough in pleasure? Come and try the pleasures of Christ – forgiveness and a new heart. I have not been at a dance or any worldly amusement for many years, and yet I believe I have had more pleasure in a single day than you have had all your life. In what? You will say. In feeling that God loves me – that Christ has washed me – and feeling that I shall be in heaven when the wicked are cast into hell. ‘A day in thy courts is better than a thousand [elsewhere]’ (Psalm 84:10)... If you die without Christ, you cannot come back to be converted and die a believer – you have but once to die. Oh, pray that you may find Christ before death finds you!”⁵⁷

In the first of six evangelistic letters to a young woman, M’Cheyne wrote:

“The world will say you are an innocent and harmless girl; do not believe them. The world is a liar. Pray to see yourself exactly as God sees you...”⁵⁸

This is not threatening or cajoling, it is applying the Gospel and plying for decision. M’Cheyne was a busy pastor and in much demand as a preacher of God’s Word, but his ownership of the Gospel made him a fisher of men. He did not excuse himself from evangelism by spending all of his time studying to preach. He lived his life expecting God to save sinners. I think that is why you read of such unique events surrounding his life. Such as the time he ducked into a shed with Tully (his faithful mule) to get out of a sudden downpour. There was a fire burning there and he turned to the man next to him and asked, “What does that remind you of?” The Lord used that simple question to save the man.

You see it in the long letters he would write back to those who were anxious for their souls:

“Every wave of trouble has been wafting you to the sunny shores of a sinless eternity. Only believe. Give unlimited credit to our God.”⁵⁹

“If you will only lay hold on Christ now, you will feel the force of that sweet command, ‘Comfort ye, comfort ye;’ double comfort, double peace, for in Jesus you have suffered double wrath. Pray over that verse; and may He who first made the light to shine out of darkness shine in to your heart, to let you see the way of salvation clearly.”⁶⁰

Is there a relationship between our delight in the Gospel and our evangelism? M’Cheyne’s life suggests this is so. If that be the case, then what does your evangelism suggest you really believe about the Gospel?

“If our neighbour’s house were on fire, would we not cry aloud and use every exertion... Oh, shall we be less earnest to save their never-dying souls, than we would be to save their bodies?”⁶¹

⁵⁷ Memoirs, 317.

⁵⁸ Memoir, 296.

⁵⁹ Memoir, 286.

⁶⁰ Memoir, 322.

⁶¹ Memoir, 404.

8. The Gospel, properly applied, will make a pastor out of you.

In one ordination sermon, M'Cheyne quotes another pastor commenting on the ministry, saying,

“Had I a thousand lives, I would willingly spend them in it; and had I a thousand sons, I would gladly devote them to it.”⁶²

M'Cheyne thought it a great honour to preach the Gospel and to be spent for the Gospel. And the Gospel shaped all that he did as a pastor. In fact, the Gospel informed *how* he did all that he did as a pastor.

“I see a man cannot be a faithful minister until he preaches Christ for Christ's sake, until he gives up striving to attract people to himself and seeks only to attract them to Christ.”⁶³

The Gospel enabled him to embrace Peter's counsel to shepherd the flock of God “that is your lot.” A good preacher can be a hot commodity in certain times and places, thus it was common for M'Cheyne to receive many offers to bigger and better parishes. As Valen notes, however:

“Nothing and no one, including the attractive calls he received from St Lennox's Church in Edinburgh as well as St Martin's in Perth could tear him away from Dundee.”⁶⁴

This was not because Dundee was small and easy charge. Having a Gospel-centred ministry meant that wherever he went, he would feel the weight of his calling. In that same ordination sermon he spoke from experience when he said,

“Few people know the deep wells of anxiety in the bosom of a faithful pastor.”⁶⁵

Men that believe the Gospel and live like it is true will feel the enormous responsibility of their calling whether they preach to ten or ten thousands. And the message they preach will be consistent throughout.

“Rowland Hill used to say, 'See there be no sermon without three R's in it: Ruin by the fall, Righteousness by Christ, and Regeneration by the Spirit. Preach Christ for awakening, Christ for comforting, Christ for sanctifying.’”⁶⁶

And this is what he so faithfully did. But true Gospel preachers know that their public work is only a small part of their ministry. Thus, he would implore fellow preachers:

“But oh, study universal holiness of life! Your whole usefulness depends on this. Your sermon on Sabbath lasts but an hour or two, – your life preaches all the week. Remember, ministers are standard-bearers. Satan aims his fiery darts at them. If he can

⁶² Memoirs, 405

⁶³ M'Cheyne, 55.

⁶⁴ Valen, 156.

⁶⁵ Memoirs, 407.

⁶⁶ Memoir, 406.

only make you a covetous minister, or lover of pleasure, or a lover of praise, or a lover of good eating, then he has ruined your ministry forever. *'Ah! Let him preach on fifty years, he will never do me any harm.'* Dear brother, cast yourself at the feet of Christ, implore His Spirit to make you a holy man. *'Take heed to thyself and to thy doctrine.'*"⁶⁷

For the entire goal of the work might be summed up in this way.

"See how Paul laid out his strength in confirming the disciples. Be a helper of their joy. Do not rest till you get them to live under the pure, holy rules of the gospel."⁶⁸

A helper of their joy! What a beautiful cause to for which to lay down our lives. And the best way to do this is to connect the Gospel to their lives, just like the Apostles did so consistently in the New Testament.

Conclusion

There were many tributes written of M'Cheyne after his death. One of those read:

"Whether viewed as a son, a brother, a friend, or as a pastor, often has the remark been made by those who knew him most intimately, that he was the most faultless and attractive exhibition of the true Christian which they had ever seen embodied in a living form."⁶⁹

And M'Cheyne's impact did not stop after his departure from this world. Men like Jonathan Goforth, that great Canadian missionary to China, were forever changed by reading of him:

"A saintly old Scotchman, Mr. Bennett, one day handed [Goforth] a well-worn copy of the Memoirs of Robert Murray M'Cheyne, saying, "Read this, my boy; it will do you good." It did! Stretched out on the dry leaves in the woods, he was soon so absorbed in the book he did not notice the passing of the hours. When the lengthening shadows of sunset aroused him, he arose a new man."⁷⁰

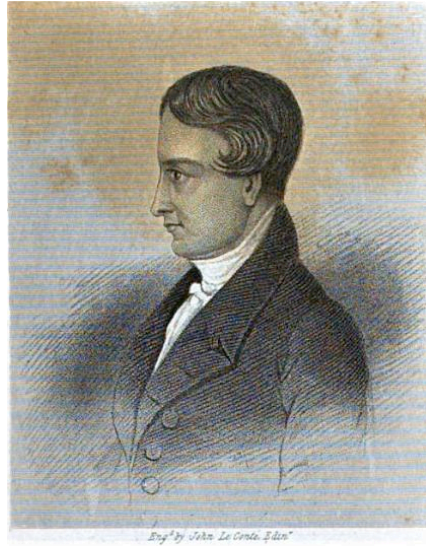
That is my prayer for you and for me. It is great to read some pithy quotes and feel stirrings in the heart, but we are hypocrites if we do not leave this life changed men. Are any of us godly enough? If nothing else, M'Cheyne's life should humble us and call us to repentance for our shallow spirituality and lack of faith in the great things God is able to do. His life should also prove to us the necessity of connecting the Gospel to everything we are and do. And that in turn should make us eager students of that Gospel.

⁶⁷ Memoir, 406. Quotes and italics added.

⁶⁸ Memoirs, 406. In his Reformation he would write, "Christ had a body such as I have, yet he never tasted one of the pleasures of sin. The redeemed, through all eternity, will never taste one of the pleasures of sin; yet their happiness is complete. It would be my greatest happiness to be, from this moment, entirely like them. Every sin is something away from my greatest enjoyment. . . The devil strives night and day to make me forget this, or disbelieve it. He says, Why should you not enjoy this pleasure as much as Solomon or David? You may go to heaven also. I am persuaded that this is a lie—that my true happiness is to go and sin no more" (Memoir, 155).

⁶⁹ Stated by John Roxburgh in his summary of M'Cheyne's life and labours. Valen, 436.

⁷⁰ Cited on June 7, 2010 from <http://www.wholesomewords.org/missions/giants/biogoforth.html>



Ever yours till glory
Robt. Murray M'Cheyne.