

Church History (61): Robert Murray McCheyne

In this lesson, we want to survey the life, ministry, and piety of a Scottish Presbyterian by the name of Robert Murray McCheyne (1813-1843), who only lived twenty-nine years, and whose ministry only lasted seven years.

I. Robert Murray McCheyne

1. *A survey of his life.* McCheyne was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, on May 21, 1813. He was the last of five children. "He grew up in a loving home. It was comfortable, middle class, well-educated, and well-connected. The McCheyne household was 'religious' in a respectable and sincere sort of way – though he would later argue that he was brought up in an unconverted home" (Robertson).¹ Several things converged in McCheyne's conversion. The first was the conversion of his older brother David, in 1729, and death two years later. This impacted McCheyne greatly. Nine years older, David was a second father who lovingly cared for him. "The death of his brother was used by the Holy Spirit to produce a deep impression on Robert's soul. He was in his eighteenth year when his brother died; and if this was not the year of his new birth, at least it was the year when the first streaks of dawn appeared in his soul" (Bonar).² McCheyne wrote several poems in reflection of his death. One ended, "How oft that eye would turn on me, with pity's tenderest look, and, only half-upbraiding, bid me flee from the vain idols of my boyish heart."³ Conversion for McCheyne came gradually. Andrew Bonar, a friend and author of his *Memoirs*, recounts a conversation he and McCheyne had about their conversions: "He stated that there was nothing sudden in his case, and that he was led to Christ through deep and ever-abiding, but not awful or distracting, convictions."⁴ It was at this time (1730), McCheyne began to read a book that he would later attribute as a means of his conversion. The book was entitled *The Sum of Saving Knowledge*, and was written by two Scottish puritans, David Dickson and James Durham. It was printed as a supplement to the Westminster Standards. Some years later he described it as "the work which I think first of all wrought a saving change in me. How gladly would I renew the reading of it, if that change might be carried on to perfection."⁵ "Having found the Pearl of Great Price, he now wanted others to find what he found. Now he wanted to know Christ more and to lead others to Him" (Robertson).⁶

"In the winter of 1831, he commenced his studies in the Divinity Hall under Dr. Chalmers, and the study of Church History under Dr. Welsh" (Bonar).⁷ "At the end of his course in spring 1835, McCheyne appeared before the Presbytery of Edinburgh to be examined for license, and he accepted an offer to serve as the assistant to John Bonar, the minister of Larbert and Dunipace" (Robertson).⁸ The two towns of Larbert and Dunipace included together about seven hundred families. In addition to the two churches, the single parish included three preaching stations (which were buildings in which midweek meetings were held). "It was his task as assistant minister to take turns in preaching at Larbert and Dunipace and during the week to visit as many people as possible" (Van Valen).⁹ In September 1836, McCheyne preached his farewell sermons to the congregations of Larbert and Dunipace, and accepted a call to St. Peter's Church, in Dundee. John Bonar said of his young assistant: "I consider

¹ David Robertson, *Awakening: The Life and Ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 17

² Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 9-10

³ Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 9

⁴ Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 11

⁵ Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 12-13

⁶ David Robertson, *Awakening: The Life and Ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 40

⁷ Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 5-6

⁸ David Robertson, *Awakening: The Life and Ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 56-57

⁹ LJ Van Valen, *Constrained by His Love: A New Biography on Robert Murray McCheyne*, 113

him a young man of excellent talents, solid study, sound principles and real piety. He is greatly beloved and delighted in by the people and the longer they know him and the more they see of him the better they love him. In a word I would count any parish highly privileged by having him appointed as their pastor."¹⁰

From the beginning, McCheyne possessed a weak constitution. "Despite his interest in physical sports, McCheyne was not robust, but had a weak heart and was vulnerable to respiratory ailments" (Robertson).¹¹ From late 1838 to 1839, severe illness forced him to return to Edinburgh to stay with his parents. Late 1839, he left for Israel on a missions trip thinking it would improve his health. "On the boat to Turkey from Lebanon he was again taken seriously ill and indeed told his congregation he had not expected to see them again" (Robertson).¹² However, he eventually recovered and returned to Dundee. In March of 1834, he fell ill with typhus fever. On March 12, he preached for the last time to his congregation. On Tuesday he officiated at a wedding and then returned home very ill. The next day he was feverish and in great pain. His sister Eliza (who lived with him to tend the house), wrote Andrew Bonar: "Dear friend, if in your power, do come. It has pleased God to lay my beloved brother on a sickbed from which there is little probability of his rising for many a day, should God spare him to us."¹³ But this would not be. "On the morning of March 25 1843, with Dr Gibson sitting beside him, McCheyne raised his hands then sank back in death. The news spread quickly through the city. It reached Andrew Bonar in Collace at 5 pm. He was devastated. '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. O Lord, the godly ceases and the faithful fail! My heart is sore. It makes me feel death near myself now. Life has lost half its joys, were it not for the hope of saving souls. There was no friend whom I loved like him'" (Robertson).¹⁴ The inscription on his grave just outside St Peter's says it all:¹⁵

Erected by his sorrowing flock in memory of the Reverend Robert Murray McCheyne: first minister of St Peter's Church, Dundee. Who died on the 25^h day of March, 1843, in the 30th year of his age and 7th of his ministry. Walking closely with God as example to the believers in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity. He ceased not day and night to labor and watch for souls and was honored by his Lord to draw many wanderers out of darkness into the path of life. Them also that sleep with Jesus will God bring with him.

2. *A survey of his ministry.* In 1836, when McCheyne came to Dundee, it was a city of over 50,000 people and his parish had nearly 4,000 people. There were three services every Sabbath and a prayer meeting on Thursdays with a sermon. The building could sit 1,200 and was largely filled from the start. McCheyne assumed responsibility not only for the church but the entire parish. He drew maps to mark off streets visited, with hopes of visiting the entire parish. He called on 12-15 houses a day (usually on a single street). "His practice was to inform people the night before that he intended to visit. He made it a habit to speak to the children and quests in every home he visited. After he had visited a home and conducted worship, he would invite all the occupants to come to an evening meeting in some large house or garden. Sometimes up to 200 would attend. These were not short meetings as he often spoke for an hour and a half" (Robertson).¹⁶ "After one such visitation day he wrote: 'Having warned thirteen

¹⁰ David Robertson, *Awakening: The Life and Ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 63

¹¹ David Robertson, *Awakening: The Life and Ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 67

¹² David Robertson, *Awakening: The Life and Ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 68

¹³ David Robertson, *Awakening: The Life and Ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 200-201

¹⁴ David Robertson, *Awakening: The Life and Ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 201-202

¹⁵ David Robertson, *Awakening: The Life and Ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 203

¹⁶ David Robertson, *Awakening: The Life and Ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 116-117

families the night before, I girded myself for that combat and commenced. I met great kindness in every house, though there were only three or four that belonged to my church" (Van Valen).¹⁷

(1) McCheyne as pastor. Above all else, McCheyne was a shepherd to his flock. This can be illustrated by pastoral letters McCheyne wrote his people when away from them. In 1839, when forced to relocate to Edinburgh for health issues, he wrote his church every week. He wrote on January 30: "God is my record of how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ; and the walls of my chamber can bear witness how often the silent watches of the night have been filled up with entreaties to the Lord for you all."¹⁸ McCheyne then suggested several benefits of their separation: ¹⁹ "First, with respect to myself. It does not become me here to show what benefit it may be to me. Suffice it to say that it has been a precious opportunity in which to reflect on the sins and imperfections of my ministry among you." "Second, with respect to you, my dear brothers and sisters in the Lord, this time of trial is for your furtherance. Does not God teach you, by means of it, to look beyond man to the Savior, who abides ever?" "Third, with regard to those among you who are almost, but not altogether, persuaded to be Christians, does not this providence teach you to make sure of an interest in Christ without delay?"

Finally, my brethren, dearly beloved and longed for, my joy and crown, abide all the more in Christ because of my absence, and maintain a closer walk with God, that when I return, as God gives me good hopes now of doing, I may rejoice to see what great things God has done for your souls. God feeds the wildflowers on the lonely mountain side, without the help of man, and they are as fresh and lovely as those that are daily watched over in our gardens. So God can feed His own planted ones without the help of man, by the sweetly falling dew of His Spirit. How I long to see you walking in holy communion with God, in love to the brethren, and burning zeal for the cause of God in the world! I will never rest, nor give God rest, till He make you a lamp that burns, a city set upon a hill that cannot be hid. Now strive together with me, in your prayers to God for me, that I may come unto you with joy by the will of God.²⁰

Another way McCheyne showed his pastoral heart, was his evident love for the children within the church. This can be illustrated in several treatises published by McCheyne. The first was called *Another Lily Gathered*, which recounted the conversion and death of a young boy named James Laing. "In this little narrative we would raise up an humble stone to the memory of a dear boy who now sleeps in Jesus, and to the praise of that God and Savior who planted, watered, and gathered His own lily" (McCheyne).²¹ James was born in 1828, converted in 1840, and died in 1842. Though too sick to attend church, McCheyne visited him often. "It was a pleasant duty indeed to visit the cottage of this youthful inquirer. Many a happy hour have I spent beneath that humble roof. He was very fond of the Song of Solomon, and many parts of it were opened up to him. One day I spoke on Song 1:5, 'I am dark, but comely.' He said, 'I am dark as hell in myself, but I'm all fair in Jesus.' This was ever after a common expression of his. Another day I spoke on Song 5:15: 'His legs are like pillars of marble set upon sockets of fine gold;' and showed the almighty strength of the Lord Jesus. The next day when I came in, I asked him how he was; but, without answering my question, he said, 'I am glad you told me that about Jesus' legs being like pillars of marble, for now I see that He is able to carry me and all my sins.'"²² McCheyne finished the account with exhortations to children, parents, and ministers. To the first of these, he said:

¹⁷ LJ Van Valen, *Constrained by His Love: A New Biography on Robert Murray McCheyne*, 174

¹⁸ Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 217

¹⁹ Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 218-220

²⁰ Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 220-221

²¹ Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 551

²² Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 555

From this affecting history, *all children*, and especially the dear children committed to my care, should learn an impressive lesson. What is said of Abel is true of this dear boy: 'He, being dead, yet speaks.' He warned many of you when he was on his dying bed; he prayed for you, and longed for your conversion; and now that he has gone to the world of praise, and holiness, and love, the history of his dying hours is a warning and an invitation to each of you. You see here that you are not too young to have the Holy Spirit striving with you. You are not too young to resist the Holy Ghost. You are not too young to be converted and brought to Christ. If you die without Christ, you will surely perish. The most of you are wicked, idle, profane, prayerless, ungodly children. If you die thus, you will have your part in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone. You will see this little body, and others whom you know, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out. Oh, repent and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out! You may die very soon. Oh that your latter end may be like his!²³

McCheyne also published a treatise called *Reasons Why Children Should Fly to Christ Without Delay*. The text was Psalm 90:14, "O satisfy us early with Thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days." He provided four reasons:²⁴ "I. *Because life is very short*. Some of you may have seen how short life is in those around you. How many friends have you lying in the grave! Some of you have more friends in the grave than in this world. It is an absolute certainty that, in a few years, all of you who read this will be lying in the grave. Oh, what need, then, to fly to Christ without delay!" "II. *Because life is very uncertain*. Men are like grass 'In the morning, it grows up and flourishes: in the evening, it is cut down and withers.' Most men are cut down while they are green. More than one-half of the human race die before they reach manhood. Death is very certain, but the time is very uncertain." "III. *Most that are ever saved fly to Christ when young*. If you are not saved in youth, it is likely you never will. There is a tide in the affairs of souls. There are times which may be called converting times. The Sabbath is the great day for gathering in souls—it is Christ's market day. Youth is a converting time. 'Suffer little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not.' Oh, you that are lambs, seek to be gathered with the arm of the Savior, and carried in His gentle bosom. Come to trust under the Savior's wings. 'Yet there is room.'" "IV. *Because it is happier to be in Christ than out of Christ*. To be in Christ satisfies the heart and will make you glad all your days. The pleasures of sin are only 'for a season;' they do not last. But to be brought to Christ is like the dawning of an eternal day; it spreads the serenity of heaven over all the days of our pilgrimage." He ended the treatise by saying: "My little children, of whom I travail in birth again till Christ be formed in you,' if you would live happy and die happy, come now to the Savior. The door of the ark is wide open. Enter now or it may be never."²⁵

(2) McCheyne as preacher. "McCheyne's preaching was simple. He sought deliberately to keep his speech plain and to use plenty of word pictures. He did not use stories, other than Biblical ones, for illustrations, preferring to refer to everyday objects. His sermons varied in length from 20 minutes to 1 1/2 hours. He was very direct in his application. One feature of his preaching was that he often spoke directly to the children" (Robertson).²⁶ In an ordination sermon preached in 1840, McCheyne said: "The grand work of the minister, in which he is to lay out his strength of body and mind, is preaching. Weak and foolish as it may appear, this is the grand instrument which God has put into our hands, by which sinners are to be saved, and saints fitted for glory."²⁷ McCheyne preached dependent upon the power and presence of God's Spirit. Soon after his death, a minister was given a tour of St. Peter's by

²³ Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 567

²⁴ Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 584-588

²⁵ Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 589

²⁶ David Robertson, *Awakening: The Life and Ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 103

²⁷ Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 401

the caretaker. Their talk turned to McCheyne. "What do you think was the secret of McCheyne's success? The secret of his pulpit power?" The caretaker led the minister into the vestry. "Kneel down by the chair." The Somewhat amused minister knelt by the chair. Then in a most solemn tone the caretaker said: "Now then, start to weep. Raise your eyes to heaven and cry to God, Oh God bless me! Oh God use me! Oh God I cannot go up to under pulpit until I know I have the mighty anointing of the Spirit resting upon me!" And looking into the face of the preacher with tear-filled eyes the caretaker said: "That dear friend, is the secret of the ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne. He was a man of prayer." McCheyne also preached with an evident sense of eternity. One eyewitness said of him: "He preached with eternity stamped upon his brow. I trembled, and never felt God so near." "He was well aware that he was speaking in God's presence and that the blood of souls would be required from his hand" (Van Valen).²⁸ He wrote in his diary: "As I was walking in the fields, the thought came over me with almost overwhelming power, that every one of my flock must soon be in heaven or hell. Oh, how I wished that I had a tongue like thunder, that I might make all hear; or that I had a frame like iron, that I might visit every one, and say, Escape for thy life! Ah, sinners! You little know how I fear that you will lay the blame of your damnation at my door!"²⁹

Revival came to Dundee in the fall of 1839. McCheyne was away on a mission's trip to Jerusalem, and had a younger man by the name of William Burns (1815-1868), fill his pulpit in his absence. "Burns preached his first sermon in St. Peter's in April 1839. His preaching was powerful and strong, and as a result, people travelled from all over the area to hear him" (Robertson).³⁰ Soon God's blessing became evident, as several churches in different parishes, began to experience revival. Burns described a Thursday night prayer meeting: "Suddenly the power of God seemed to descend, and all were bathed in tears. The next evening there was a prayer meeting in the Church. There was much melting of heart and intense desire after the beloved of the Father."³¹ "From then on prayer meetings were held every night for several weeks. The same also occurred in other churches. McCheyne returned to Dundee on November 23 of 1839. It was Thursday and after calling in at the manse McCheyne then went to the Thursday meeting. The building was crowded with over 1,200 people. The singing of the first psalm seemed particularly hearty and full. He wrote to his parents: 'I never saw such an assembly in a church before. Many ministers came to support me. There was not a spot in the church left unoccupied. Every passage and stair were filled. I was almost overwhelmed by the sight; but felt great liberty in preaching. I never before preached to such an audience, so many weeping, so many waiting, for the words of eternal life'" (Robertson).³²

Given the youthfulness of the ministers involved, and the fact that many of those converted in Dundee were children, some criticized the revival. "In December 1840 the Presbytery of Aberdeen produced a questionnaire which sought to find out information from the people and places where revival had taken place" (Robertson).³³ The first of thirteen questions was: "Have revivals taken place in your parish or district; and if so, to what extent, and by what instrumentality and mean?" McCheyne responded: "It is my decided and solemn conviction, in the sight of God, that a very remarkable and glorious work of God, in the conversion of sinners and edifying of saints, has taken place in this parish and neighborhood. This work of have observed going on from the very beginning of my ministry in this place in November 1836, and it has continued to the present time; but it was much more remarkable in the autumn of 1839, when I was abroad on a Mission of Inquiry to the Jews, and when my place was

²⁸ LJ Van Valen, *Constrained by His Love: A New Biography on Robert Murray McCheyne*, 174

²⁹ Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 148

³⁰ David Robertson, *Awakening: The Life and Ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 160

³¹ David Robertson, *Awakening: The Life and Ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 161

³² David Robertson, *Awakening: The Life and Ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 168

³³ David Robertson, *Awakening: The Life and Ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 173

occupied by the Rev. W.C. Burns. At the time of my return, I found thirty-nine prayer meetings held weekly in connection with the congregation, and five of these were conducted and attended entirely by little children. At present, although many changes have taken place, I believe the number of these meetings is not much diminished."³⁴

(3) McCheyne as missionary. "Although engaged night and day with his flock in St. Peter's, Mr. McCheyne ever cherished a missionary spirit. This spirit he sought to kindle yet more by reading missionary intelligence for his own use, and often to his people at his weekly prayer-meeting. The necessities both of his own parish, and of the world at large, lay heavy on his soul; and when an opportunity of evangelizing occurred, there was none in Scotland more ready to embrace it. He seemed one who stood with his loins girt: 'Here am I; send me'" (Bonar).³⁵ This led McCheyne to conduct several short missionary trips both in the south and north of Scotland. In a letter written in 1843, he spoke about "preaching twenty-seven times when I was away, in twenty-four different places."³⁶ But his concern largely laid with the Jewish people. "McCheyne had always had a desire to be an overseas missionary, but his particular interest was in the Jewish work" (Robertson).³⁷ This led McCheyne to join an exploratory group, who left for Israel in 1839. "It was decided to send a delegation to Israel to investigate the condition of the Jews there and throughout Europe. The purpose of their mission was largely a demographic study. They were to find out the number of Jews and their character and condition" (Robertson).³⁸ McCheyne returned to Scotland a year later. "For the whole of 1840 McCheyne and Bonar were busy speaking at churches all over the country to crowded meetings on the subject of Jewish evangelism. As a result, in March 1841, Daniel Edward was ordained as the first missionary of the Scottish Church to the Jews" (Robertson).³⁹

3. *A survey of his piety.* McCheyne's godliness was evident to all. Isabella Dickson (later to become the wife of Andrew Bonar) described McCheyne after hearing him preach: "There was something singularly attractive about Mr. McCheyne's holiness. It was not his matter nor his manner either that struck me; it was jut the *living epistle of Christ* – a picture so lovely, I felt I would have given all the world to be as he was, but knew all the time I was dead in my sins."⁴⁰ He told a young minister: "Study universal holiness of life. Your whole usefulness depends on this, for your sermons last but an hour or two, your life preaches all the week."⁴¹ He exhorted a ministerial student: "How diligently the cavalry officer keeps his saber clean and sharp; every stain he rubs off with the greatest care. Remember you are God's sword—His instrument—I trust a chosen vessel unto Him to bear His name. In great measure, according to the purity and perfections of the instrument, will be the success. 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."⁴² He told a fellow minister: "Learn much of the Lord Jesus. For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ. He is altogether lovely. Such infinite majesty, and yet such meekness and grace, and all for sinners, even the chief. Live much in the smiles of God. Bask in His beams. Feel His all-seeing eye settled on you in love, and repose in His almighty arms. Cry after divine knowledge, and lift up your voice for understanding. Let your soul be filled with a heart-ravishing sense of the sweetness and excellency of Christ and all that is in Him."⁴³

³⁴ Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 544-555

³⁵ Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 83

³⁶ Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 330

³⁷ David Robertson, *Awakening: The Life and Ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 147

³⁸ David Robertson, *Awakening: The Life and Ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 148-149

³⁹ David Robertson, *Awakening: The Life and Ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 155-156

⁴⁰ Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 330

⁴¹ Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 330

⁴² Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 330

⁴³ Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne*, 293