

The Piety of Robert Murray M'Cheyne:

Reflected in his Life and Ministry

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The personal history of Robert Murray M'Cheyne has been recorded for the Church in the famous biography by Andrew Bonar. These memoirs detail the life of Rev. M'Cheyne and show what made him a great preacher of God, and how he was used by God for the furthering of His Kingdom in Scotland. The most significant aspect of M'Cheyne's life that stands out is his personal piety. He reflected this in every aspect of his life. Preachers of today can learn much from M'Cheyne's personal life in a day when personal holiness for preachers and pastors is at a premium as they struggle with conformity to the world. M'Cheyne's godly example provides a healthy antidote to the competition of a world that seeks to encroach on a minister's life, study and pulpit. He stands as one of the most powerful figures in history. He was a man who walked day-by-day with his God, sought the eternal welfare of his people with tears and combined these two in a passionate ministry pleading for people to repent and be reconciled to God because their souls were at stake. This paper then seeks to examine how M'Cheyne's personal piety was reflected in his preaching and how that might offer encouragement to men who struggle in the milieu of 21st century ministry.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne was born in Edinburgh on 21 May 1813.¹ He was born into a solid middle class family during the time of the Industrial Revolution. Young Robert was a talented youngster and excelled at his studies, learning Greek, Latin and Hebrew as well as possessing a poetic mind and literary wit.² These gifts would serve him in his later ministry that God was preparing him for. The people around him often commented on his soft, caring and compassionate disposition, which no doubt would impact his care and desire to urge people in

¹ Leen J. Van Valen, *Constrained by His Love: A New Biography on Robert Murray McCheyne* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), 12.

² Robert Murray M'Cheyne and Andrew Bonar, *Memoir & Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2004), 3-4.

his preaching to flee to Christ for their souls' sake.³ During his early years, M'Cheyne was deeply affected by the death of his brother David. Young Robert sorely missed the presence of the brother who had gone before him to his heavenly Father, yet he also sensed that he was missing what David possessed in terms of spiritual peace and reconciliation with God.⁴ The death of his brother began to effect a profound change in the heart and life of Robert. Bonar comments that this was the year, 1831, M'Cheyne's eighteenth year that the Spirit was working in him, "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."⁵ M'Cheyne himself comments on this change of heart and life the year after his brother died, "This day eleven years ago, I lost my loved and loving brother, and began to seek a Brother who cannot die."⁶

M'Cheyne eventually found that Brother, or rather this Brother found him. A struggle ensued between Robert's heart and the world which beckoned him with its seemingly alluring pleasures and trysts. He records in his journal the difficulty he had in this struggle, "A thorn in my side—much torment...absented myself from the dance; upbraidings ill to bear. But I must try to bear the cross."⁷ Despite his struggles and prevailing sins, M'Cheyne records in his

Memoirs that Jesus had become his all:

O great God, that didst suffer me to live whilst I so dishonoured Thee, Thou knowest the whole; and it was Thy hand alone that could awaken me from the death in which I was, and was contented to be. Gladly would I have escaped from the Shepherd that sought me as I strayed; but He took me up in His arms and carried me back; and yet He took me not for anything that was in me.⁸

³ Ibid., 4.

⁴ Van Valen, *Constrained by His Love*, 49.

⁵ M'Cheyne and Bonar, *Memoirs*, 10.

⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁷ Van Valen, *Constrained by His Love*, 52-53.

⁸ M'Cheyne and Bonar, *Memoirs*, 16-17.

His own righteousness made void, Robert began to live out of the righteousness of Christ. It is this statement that largely controlled his piety and his preaching, since he was always acutely aware of his own sinfulness, yet also acutely aware of the abundant remedy in the blood and righteousness of Christ.

As young Robert began to grow in his faith, his life was marked by a turn around. Whereas before he would take part in the gaiety of student life and worldly pursuits, his mind and heart now began to turn towards ministry and how he might serve his Master.⁹ In November 1831 he became a candidate for the ministry in the Church of Scotland and during this initial period of ministerial training he was heavily influenced by Thomas Chalmers.¹⁰ Chalmers was instrumental in shaping M'Cheyne's thought and had a profound impact on many of M'Cheyne's contemporaries. All these circumstances contributed to the development, maturation and legendary piety instilled in M'Cheyne as he experienced a change both in his own heart and in terms of vocation. His changed life led him to pursue a calling to the ministry to the dismay of his parents who felt that a man of his caliber would make a good lawyer, which was at that time more socially acceptable.¹¹ Despite familial pressures to the contrary, he dedicated his heart and soul, mind and body to his Master out of gratitude for deliverance from sin and bondage.

His call to the ministry and personal piety grew simultaneously as the Lord continued His good work in M'Cheyne's life. He increasingly began to detest his former life seeing the emptiness and futility of living for self.¹² He was gradually being molded and fitted for service

⁹ David Robertson, *Awakening: The Life and Ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne* (Milton Keynes, UK: Authentic Media, 2004), 94.

¹⁰ Marcus L. Loane, *They Were Pilgrims: David Brainerd, Henry Martyn, Robert Murray M'Cheyne, Ion Keith Falconer* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2006), 142.

¹¹ Van Valen, *Constrained by His Love*, 58-59.

¹² M'Cheyne and Bonar, *Memoirs*, 18-19.

in the Master's kingdom. He began to read biographies of men who had gone before him to foreign mission outposts and commented on their godly examples, "Would I could but imitate him [Henry Martyn], giving father, mother, country, house, health, life, all for Christ. And yet, what hinders? Lord purify me, and give me strength to dedicate myself, my all, to Thee."¹³ This statement comprehends M'Cheyne's personal piety as well as his preaching. Although he himself felt that he was not dedicated to Christ with his all, yet his sermons and personal life stand as perpetual testimonies of his faithfulness to his Savior.

This faithfulness in M'Cheyne's life translated into a life of deep and holy piety which burned deep within his soul. He lived constantly with a sense of his own unworthiness, yet rejoiced at the fact that he too was purchased heart, soul, mind and body with the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. When his former sins came to plague his mind and conscience he reflected on his salvation in Christ, "But perhaps my old sins are too fearful, and my unbelief too glaring? Nay; I come to Christ, not although I am a sinner, but just because I am a sinner, even the chief."¹⁴ In one breath M'Cheyne decried his own sinfulness and in the next breath proclaimed the sufficiency of Christ for such a sinner as himself. He records this experience in this way, "Much broken under a sense of my exceeding wickedness, which no eye can see but Thine. Much persuasion of the sufficiency of Christ, and of the constancy of His love."¹⁵ The believer of today has much to learn from M'Cheyne in this area; though sin still clings to this body, yet Christ is sufficient to forgive that sin. The question then arises as to how Robert cultivated this deep sense of his own sinfulness as well as such a deep appreciation for Jesus Christ. He did so through careful preparation of his heart and mind each day, especially before preaching.

¹³ Van Valen, *Constrained by His Love*, 60.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁵ M'Cheyne and Bonar, *Memoirs*, 56.

Shortly after his conversion he relates his experiences of reading the Bible on a Sabbath evening in his *Memoirs*, “Reading. Too much engrossed, and too little devotional. Preparation for a fall. Warning. We may be too engrossed with the shell even of heavenly things.”¹⁶ At another place he records, “Mind quite unfitted for devotion. Prayerless prayer.”¹⁷ Day by day he records his struggles to maintain a rich devotional life. Perhaps the question he asks in one of his entries is most telling, “Humble, purpose-like reading of the word omitted. What plant can be unwatered and not wither?”¹⁸

Although it seems that M’Cheyne never had a moment of communion with his Lord, this is not the case, but these entries of his diary indicate that he had a keen sense of his proclivity to become lax in the area of personal devotion. He recognized that a personal relationship with God through reading and meditation of His Word and earnest prolonged prayer were a key to a vibrant and robust spiritual life. He did have very positive experiences which he records in his diary which show that though he often mourned his lack of fervency and preparedness in personal devotion he nevertheless did taste and see that the Lord is good. One of his entries reads, “Sabbath evening. Much prayer and peace. Reading the Bible only,”¹⁹ demonstrating that prayer and Scripture were the lifeblood of his walk with the Lord.

Confession of sin was also an essential part of M’Cheyne’s devotional life as indicated in his section on “Personal Reformation” in his memoirs. M’Cheyne firmly believed that he needed to maintain a clear conscience before God, which could only be achieved through a

¹⁶ Ibid., 19.

¹⁷ Ibid., 20.

¹⁸ Ibid., 20.

¹⁹ Ibid., 56.

faithful self-examination and confession of sin. His words are convicting when he states the need and motivation for confession:

I ought to go to Christ for the forgiveness of each sin. In washing my body, I go over every spot, and wash it out. Should I be less careful in washing my soul? I ought to see the stripe that was made on the back of Jesus by each of my sins. I ought to see the infinite pang thrill through the soul of Jesus equal to an eternity of my hell for my sins. I ought to see that in Christ's bloodshedding there is an infinite over-payment for all my sins. Although Christ did not suffer more than infinite justice demanded, yet He could not suffer at all without laying down an infinite ransom.²⁰

His piety was not motivated then for self-improvement only, but was firmly Christocentric and done out of thankfulness and living to the glory of God. The only way to peace and holiness for Robert was to go immediately to Jesus Christ with any sin that was committed.²¹

The prayer flowing from faith was also essential for M'Cheyne. From early morning to late at night, his days were permeated and sustained by prayer. Prayer was not optional for him, but he says that "I ought to pray before seeing any one."²² Prayer was vital for his ministry to the souls under his care as he himself says, "I can do no good to those who come to seek from me. The conscience feels guilty, the soul unfed, the lamp not trimmed."²³ Prayer is not easy work as any child of God can attest to, and M'Cheyne cautions against the pitfalls of keeping an eye on the clock to have a determined length of prayer, "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."²⁴ Different types of prayer were also very important to M'Cheyne's piety. Central to his ministry and preaching was intercessory prayer for all his acquaintances, family members and church members, as well as all the activities he

²⁰ Ibid., 151.

²¹ Ibid., 151.

²² Ibid., 156.

²³ Ibid., 157.

²⁴ Ibid., 157.

undertook as a minister of the Gospel. Everything was committed daily to the Lord in prayer. Andrew Bonar notes that M'Cheyne reserved Sabbath mornings for prayer, a key no doubt to his passionate and Spirit-filled preaching in the pulpit that same day.

Bonar also was convicted by the holiness that was very much a part of M'Cheyne's life as they traveled to the Holy Land together:

I was often reprov'd by his unabated attention to personal holiness; for this care was never absent from his mind, whether he was at home in his quiet chamber, or on the sea, or in the desert. Holiness in him was manifested, not by efforts to perform duty, but in a way so natural, that you recognized therein the easy outflowing of the indwelling Spirit. The soul, welled forth its living waters...Prayer and meditation on the word were never forgotten; and a peace that the world could not give kept his heart and mind.²⁵

His contemporaries and modern biographers often speak of his holiness and piety which burned during his preaching, causing his listeners to say that it "was not so much what he said as the way in which he said it that won their hearts and drew them to put their trust in Christ."²⁶

Marcus Loane further comments on the life and preaching of M'Cheyne saying that it was "his own personal holiness rather than his persuasive arguments which made the decisive impressions."²⁷

A life steeped in the Scriptures and spent in prayer characterized the ministry and preaching of M'Cheyne as he pled with souls to turn to Jesus for salvation lest they find themselves in hell before it was too late. He was diligent in cultivation of his piety, so that he might be a diligent harvester of souls. His sermons flowed from a heart overflowing with the Gospel message. The change wrought in his own soul through the wonderful love and atoning death of the Savior gave his own message a personal tone and urgency which spoke of his desire

²⁵ Ibid., 94.

²⁶ Marcus Loane, *They Were Pilgrims*, 174.

²⁷ Ibid., 174.

to see his people saved. His sermons are a testimony to succeeding generations of how personal piety and holiness is essential to a Spirit-filled and soul-winning ministry.

M'Cheyne's sermons very much reflect the piety and holiness behind them. As his piety was Christ-centered, so his preaching was eminently Christ-centered. There was not an opportunity the preacher let slip to bring Christ to his hearers in all His suitability, love, glory, and majesty as the Savior of sinners. M'Cheyne records his own reflection upon a year past of preaching, "Eventful week; one year I have preached Jesus. Have I? Or myself? I have often preached myself also, but Jesus I have preached."²⁸ This was not hubris on the part of M'Cheyne but only a confirmation of his deep piety and unwavering faith in Christ. Bonar concludes that "the real secret of his soul's prosperity lay in the daily enlargement of his heart in fellowship with his God."²⁹

His deep, daily meditation on Scripture gave M'Cheyne a roadmap for his ministry and what God expected from him as an ambassador of Christ. Alexander Smellie in his biography of M'Cheyne includes one of the "manuscript quartos" of M'Cheyne's morning meditation on 1 Thessalonians 2. In this quarto he raises this question, "What should a minister be?"³⁰ His answer is extensive but convicting and demonstrates the seriousness with which M'Cheyne approached the pulpit ministry and the care of eternal souls:

1. *Bold in our God.* Having the courage of one who is near and dear to God, and who has God dwelling in him.
2. *To speak the Gospel.* He should be a voice to speak the gospel, an angel of glad tidings.
3. *With much agony.* He should wrestle with God, and wrestle with men.
4. *Not of uncleanness.* He should be chaste in heart, in eye, in speech.
5. *Not of deceit or guile.* He should be open, having only one end in view, the glory of Christ.
6. *Allowed of God to be put in trust.* He should feel a steward, entrusted of God.
7. *Not as pleasing men, but God.* He should speak what God will approve, who tries the heart.
8. *Neither flattering words.* He should never flatter men, even to win them.

²⁸ Van Valen, *Constrained by His Love*, 122.

²⁹ M'Cheyne and Bonar, *Memoirs*, 54.

³⁰ Alexander Smellie, *Robert Murray McCheyne* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 1995), 73.

9. *Nor a cloke of covetousness.* Not seeking money or presents, devoted to his work with a single eye.
10. *Nor of men sought we glory.* Not seeking praise.
11. *Gentle even as a nurse.*
12. *Affectionately desirous of you.* Having an inward affection and desire for the salvation and growth of his people.
13. *Willing to impart our own souls.* Willing to suffer loss, even of life, in their cause.
14. *Laboriousness night and day.*
15. *To preach without being chargeable,* to any of his people.
16. *Holily*
17. *Justly*
18. *Unblameably we behaved among believers.* The daily walk.
19. *Exhorted every one.* Individuality of ministry.
20. *As a father.* Authority and love.
21. *Thank we God.* He should be full of thanksgiving without ceasing.
22. *Should be with his people in heart, when not in presence.*
23. *Endeavoured to see you.*
24. *His people his hope.* That which animates him.
25. *And joy.* Immediate delight.
26. *And crown of rejoicing.* When he looks beyond the grave.³¹

These characteristics of the Christian ministry that M'Cheyne lists are poignant, soul-searching, convicting and encouraging all at once. For M'Cheyne, these qualifications were not found in himself, but in the One who sent him, Jesus Christ. They demonstrate the necessity of the minister's personal piety and walk with God which overflows into a life of ministry.

M'Cheyne's life and ministry prove that a healthy, robust spiritual life and vital communion with God is the key to a successful ministry. The two cannot be separated, because a Spirit-filled ministry is fueled by a Spirit-filled personal walk with God.

While the afore-mentioned list is M'Cheyne's paradigm for ministry he also made every attempt to live by it as he ministered to his flock in Dundee and elsewhere. Marcus Loane makes the comment that M'Cheyne and his circle of friends introduced a "New School of Preaching" in Scotland of which Robert was the leader.³² Their preaching was characterized by earnestness and passion, and Loane remarks that M'Cheyne was well aware that a minister must be faithful

³¹ Ibid., 73-74.

³² Loane, *They Were Pilgrims*, 169.

and can only do so if “held as a star in the right hand of God.”³³ This led him “to prepare for the pulpit with an eye to eternity.”³⁴ There was a characteristic urgency and pleading with his listeners to close with Christ because their eternal souls were at stake. Preparation was paramount before M’Cheyne ascended the pulpit and he preached largely extemporaneously feeling that if he was bound to his notes, he could not plead and apply the Word effectively to his listeners.³⁵

This emphasis on earnest pleading and reasoning with his listeners and inviting them to close with Christ was characteristic of most of his sermons. He would often preach, calling the people to repentance, to embrace Christ, warning them of hell, and of dying Christless, “But when you die, if you die Christless, you will be utterly and eternally forsaken by God....God’s children will have His smile upon them, His arms around them, but you will wait in vain for a kind look. His eye will not pity. His hand will not spare.”³⁶ While he warned people of their perilous state outside of Christ he did so in a tender and compassionate way. He believed that there was a difference in warning people out of love or simply reproaching them for their unbelief. Loane captures the sense of M’Cheyne’s warnings best when he says, “It is not by threats and thunder, but by love and pathos; it is not by words that scorch and condemn, but by a heart that bleeds to bless that souls are won.”³⁷

While M’Cheyne did not spare warning his listeners about a Christless life and death, he did not simply leave them there, but earnestly and freely invited them to flee to Christ. His

³³ Ibid., 170.

³⁴ Ibid., 170.

³⁵ Ibid., 170.

³⁶ Robert Murray M’Cheyne, *Old Testament Sermons*, ed. Michael D. McMullen (Edinburgh: Banner of Trust Trust, 2004), 23.

³⁷ Loane, *They Were Pilgrims*, 172.

preaching was remarkably balanced between the elements of warning and of invitation. He portrayed Christ as a Savior who was near and willing to save.³⁸ In his sermon on Luke 15:1-7 entitled “The Lost Sheep,” he beautifully portrays how Christ is a willing Savior and a Shepherd who seeks out lost sheep. He first sets out the marks of those whom the Shepherd seeks and then displays Christ in this winsome way, “Oh, to be borne on the shoulders of the Good Shepherd, to be carried as a lamb in His bosom, so that none can pluck us out of His hand! What a completeness there is in Jesus’ salvation! Nothing is left wanting. Will you not be persuaded to take this Savior for your Savior?”³⁹

As important as warning and invitation were to M’Cheyne’s preaching he was also equally discriminatory in preaching. He often sensed among his people a presumption of being saved from sin while their very lifestyles militated against such a confession, or he sensed hesitancy and doubt on his listener’s part in coming and closing with Christ. Samples of his sermons prove this desire to divide the Word of God rightly and leading the people to true heart repentance and reformation whatever their case might be. His sermons are concerned to apply the Word to different categories of listeners. For example in a sermon on Hebrews 4:12-13, he speaks “To those who are dead in sins....some [who] feel ready to die....some [who] are declining and coming short of that rest.”⁴⁰ He never hesitates to outline the life and heart of those who live without God and who do not give Him the glory as they ought by living Christless

³⁸ M’Cheyne, *Old Testament Sermons*, 11-12.

³⁹ Robert Murray M’Cheyne, *New Testament Sermons*, ed. Michael D. McMullen (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2004), 71.

⁴⁰ Robert Murray M’Cheyne, *Sermons on Hebrews*, ed. Michael D. McMullen (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2004), 37-38.

lives.⁴¹ His preaching says Van Valen, was “the result of his own deep knowledge of the human heart and his own life experience.”⁴²

Another important dimension of his preaching that reflected his piety was the eminent practicality of his sermons. There was hardly a sermon that the listener could not take home and ruminate over in mind and heart and translate into action. In particular an Old Testament sermon on Ecclesiastes 9:10 entitled “Things That Must Be Done Now” stands out as one of his more practical sermons and provides a good example for practical preaching. In this sermon he outlines several things that demand a person’s attention: conversion of your own soul, the conversion of friends and acquaintances, sanctification, and advancement of Christ’s kingdom.⁴³ He then goes on to give practical advice on how these things might be attained: using the present time, breaking through any obstacles, and persevering in these duties.⁴⁴ The pointed motivations for these duties are also given, “The time is short....most of you have lost your best opportunity....nothing can be done in the grave.”⁴⁵

M’Cheyne’s preaching was reflective of his piety in all the elements listed above. Andrew Bonar speaks of his own experience with the meshing of M’Cheyne’s piety and preaching. This quote is in the context of M’Cheyne’s preparation of heart and mind before preaching on Sunday and the importance for M’Cheyne doing this before each time he ascended the pulpit. “His ministry,” says Bonar, “was so much a bringing out of views that had first

⁴¹ M’Cheyne, *Old Testament Sermons*, 116-117.

⁴² Van Valen, *Constrained by His Love*, 123.

⁴³ M’Cheyne, *Old Testament Sermons*, 45-46.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 47-49.

⁴⁵ M’Cheyne, *Old Testament Sermons*, 49. Here M’Cheyne means that youth is the best time to perform these duties with youthful zeal and energy. Here M’Cheyne speaks about the urgency of personal conversion and the urgency of seeing others converted, seeing this cannot be done from the grave.

sanctified his own soul, that the healthiness of his soul was absolutely needful to the vigour and power of his ministrations.”⁴⁶ M’Cheyne himself comments on the necessity of being bathed in the love of God, His Word and prayer, “And surely we should aim at nothing less than to pour forth the truth upon our people through the channel of our own living and deeply affected souls.”⁴⁷

M’Cheyne’s piety and preaching were always Christ-centered. He recognized that while piety was the life of his preaching, neither of these operated outside of Christ. He always maintained a broken and contrite heart before God, yet also maintained a vibrant and joyous faith in Christ his Savior. In his sermon on Psalm 51, M’Cheyne shows how that piety and preaching are to be Christ-centered, “It is not a look into your own heart, or the heart of hell, but into the heart of Christ, that breaks the heart. Oh, pray for this broken heart! Boasting is excluded. To Him be the glory. Worthy is the Lamb!”⁴⁸ M’Cheyne relates his struggles in maintaining a broken and contrite heart, “A day...of much temptation to flattery and pride.”⁴⁹

Robert Murray M’Cheyne was a man who knew his own heart through careful self-examination and self-abasement, through careful study and application of Scripture to his own life first, and through deep meditation on the person and work of Christ in his own life. These elements contributed to his personal growth in holiness; the latter of these components being the most important for out of his own experience with Christ he preached. He preached the encounter of unrighteous sinners with a perfectly righteous Savior who is able to meet all their needs. Preachers of the 21st century would do well to heed the life of M’Cheyne who lived near

⁴⁶ M’Cheyne and Bonar, *Memoirs*, 52.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 436.

⁴⁹ Van Valen, *Constrained by His Love*, 123.

to His Savior's side and saw his ministry blessed by the work of the Holy Spirit, despite many setbacks, afflictions, illnesses and from a human perspective an early death. He was used as an instrument in the Redeemer's hands, showing forth the love of Christ to sinners, and showing forth a life of thankfulness to God for saving him from sin and from hell. He never hesitated to describe sin in all its heinousness, and to set forth Christ as the all-sufficient Savior!

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