1839 Revival Part 3 - Kilsyth

Of the 1839-40 revivals in Scotland the best known is the work of God at St Peter’s in Dundee where Robert Murray McCheyne was minister. However the man who was the first instrument God used there was William Chalmers Burns. Burns, aged 24, was a friend of McCheyne and newly licenced as a probation minister of the Church of Scotland. When the revival broke out in Dundee, McCheyne was away on his now famous trip to Israel, where he was investigating mission to the Jews, and W C Burns stood in for him at St Peter’s from April 1839. Though “a mere stripling” he was much loved by the congregation there.

Description of W C Burns. A church officer wrote of him at the time “Scarcely had Mr Burns entered on his work in St Peter’s here, when his power as a preacher began to be felt. Gifted with a solid and vigorous understanding, possessed of a voice of vast compass and power, unsurpassed even by that of Mr Spurgeon – and withal fired with an ardour so intense and an energy so exhaustless that nothing could damp or resist it. Crowds flocked to St Peter’s from all the country round. Wherever Mr Burns preached a deep impression was produced on his audience and it was felt to be impossible to remain unconcerned under the impassioned earnestness of his appeals.” (McMullen p 30.)

WC Burns was the son of W Burns, the minister at Kilsyth and in July 1839 he returned to help his father with the communion season there. His father had been minister there since 1821 and he had a keen interest in revival, encouraging the congregation to pray for revival. He was very much aware of the revival heritage in Kilsyth from 90 years earlier. It was in Kilsyth that revival first broke out in 1839.

The revival was well documented by W Burns, who wrote a detailed account for the Presbytery of Glasgow and also in the journals of W C Burns.

William Chalmers Burns - God’s Instrument at Kilsyth.

Burns arrived in Kilsyth late on 16th July and only spent three weeks there, till August 8th. The revival began on the Tuesday following his arrival and the effects were dramatic. W C Burns looked back at that Tuesday morning as “one of the Lord’s wondrous works.” (McMullen p 33) He was due to speak in the market place but the weather was bad so they crowded into the church. Burns recorded “When I entered the pulpit, I saw before me an immense multitude from the town and neighbourhood filling the seats, stairs, passages and porches, all in their ordinary clothes and including many of the most abandoned of our population.” Burns spoke from Psalm 110:3 on “the day of the Lord’s power.” He recounted what happened at Kirk O’ Shotts in 1630 when John Livingstone (a “native of Kilsyth”) preached in the rain about having a shelter from the Lord’s wrath. All listened “with the most riveted and solemn attention but with many silent tears and inward groaning of the spirit.” Burns continued “I felt my own soul moved in a manner so remarkable that I was led, like Mr Livingstone, to plead with the unconverted before me to close with God’s offers of mercy and continued to do so until the power of the Lord’s Spirit became so mighty upon their souls as to carry all before it, like the rushing mighty wind of Pentecost. Suddenly as God’s Spirit moved in their midst, many broke forth simultaneously in weeping and wailing, tears and groans, intermingled with shouts of joy and praise from some of the people of God. Some were screaming in agony; others, and among these strong men, fell to the ground as if they had been dead; and such was the general commotion that after repeating for some time the most free and urgent invitations of the Lord to sinners, I was obliged to give out a psalm which was soon joined by a considerable number, our voices being mingled with the mourning groans of many prisoners sighing for deliverance.” (McMullen p 34) This meeting went on for 5 hours. (See also p 145-151)

Burns then returned to St Peter’s Dundee, on August 8th and told the people there about the events just happening in Kilsyth. Then revival broke out in Dundee.

A Kilsyth Eyewitness Account.

All business in Kilsyth stopped and daily services were held in the church and in the open air for the next three months. Many prayer meetings started up all over the area. A Kilsyth eyewitness from this time wrote “The web became nothing to the weaver, nor the forge to the blacksmith, nor his bench to the carpenter, nor his furrow to the ploughman. They forsook all to crowd the churches and prayer meetings. There were
nightly sermons in every church, household meetings for prayer in every street, twos and threes in earnest conversation on every road and single wrestlers with God in the solitary places of the field and glen.”

(Robert Murray McCheyne, Derek Prime. Day One.)

Burns, assisted by his father and uncle, Dr Burns of Paisley, preached to crowds of 3000-4000. One collier, D.S. was converted on the night of 21st August and was killed in an underground explosion the next morning. Crowds of enquirers sought help at the manse and many ministers from other parts of the country came to give assistance. Soon more and more interested people began to travel by train from Glasgow to see what was happening. For the September communion crowds of between 12,000 and 15,000 gathered at Kilsyth. On Communion Sunday W C Burns preached for two hours on Isaiah 54:4. He preached at an outdoor meeting that night which lasted three hours. Many people then stayed in the church all night to pray, Burns finally going home to rest at 6.00am. On the Monday, Burns was again preaching to a congregation of 2000. At the evening service W C Burns felt led to invite those not converted to come and sit at the front of the church to receive an address and to be prayed for. This alarmed all the ministers present but many responded. “There seemed to be a general and sweet melting of heart among the audience, and many of the unconverted were weeping bitterly aloud though I spoke throughout with perfect calmness and solemnity.” (McMullen p40) There were 90 new communicants from the parish at the September communion, aged from 12 to 70. Many were aged 15-18. W Burns wrote “I know of several cases of whole houses being really converted.”

(There were also large numbers of converts at Banton, nearby.)

A Mighty Change In This Place For The Better.

The father of W C Burns, W Burns wrote an account to Presbytery in October 1839. “The waiting on of young and older people at the close of each meeting, and the anxious asking of so many “What to do”; the lively singing of the praises of God, which every visitor remarks; the complete absence of swearing and of foolish talking in our streets; the order and solemnity at all hours prevailing; the voice of praise and prayer almost in every house; the cessation of tumults of the people; the consignment to the flames of volumes of infidelity and impurity; the coming together for Divine worship of such a multitude of our population day after day; the large catalogue of new intending communicants giving in their names; old careless sinners and frozen formalists awakened and made alive to God; the conversation of several poor colliers, who have come to me and given the most satisfactory account of their change of mind and heart, are truly wonderful proofs of a most surprising and delightful revival. The public houses, the coal pits, the harvest reaping fields, the weaving loomsteads, the recesses of our glens and the sequestered haughs all around, all may be called to witness that there is a mighty change in this place for the better.”

(McMullen p 35.)

The Wider Influence. W C Burns looked after St Peter’s Dundee until McCheyne returned, delighted to find his church awakened. Then Burns travelled in Scotland, preaching with great effectiveness. The first phase of the revival was centred in Kilsyth and Dundee. Then it spread to Perth and Perthshire, Kelso and Jedburgh in the Borders, while Tain in the far north and Glasgow were also touched. The key leaders were a group of young friends, William C Burns, Robert Murray McCheyne, The Bonar brothers and Alexander Somerville. In 1847 W C Burns went out to China as a pioneer missionary with the Presbyterian Church of England where he was an inspiration to Hudson Taylor. He died in 1868.

Kilsyth was to experience a third significant revival in 1908.

Books.


(This includes the account of the revival by Rev W Burns.)
