

Robt. Murray McKeay



Robert Murray M'Cheyne (1813–1843)

# LOVE TO CHRIST

Robert Murray M'Cheyne and  
the Pursuit of Holiness

Introduced and Edited by  
Jordan Stone



**Reformation Heritage Books**  
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*Love to Christ*

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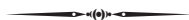
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## Profiles in Reformed Spirituality



Charles Dickens's famous line in *A Tale of Two Cities*—"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times"—seems well suited to Western evangelicalism since the 1960s. On the one hand, these decades have seen much for which to praise God and to rejoice. In His goodness and grace, for instance, Reformed truth is no longer a house under siege. Growing numbers identify themselves theologically with what we hold to be biblical truth, namely, Reformed theology and piety. And yet, as an increasing number of Reformed authors have noted, there are many sectors of the surrounding Western evangelicalism that are characterized by great shallowness and a trivialization of the weighty things of God. So much of evangelical worship seems barren. And when it comes to spirituality, there is little evidence of the riches of our heritage as Reformed evangelicals.

As it was at the time of the Reformation, when the watchword was *ad fontes*—"back to the sources"—so it is now: The way forward is backward. We need to go back to the spiritual heritage of Reformed evangelicalism to find the pathway forward. We cannot live in the past; to attempt to do so would be antiquarianism. But our Reformed forebearers in the faith can teach us much about Christianity, its doctrines, its passions, and its fruit.

And they can serve as our role models. As R. C. Sproul has noted of such giants as Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards: "These men all were conquered, overwhelmed, and spiritually intoxicated by their vision of the holiness of God. Their minds and imaginations were captured by the majesty of God the Father. Each of them possessed a profound affection for the sweetness and excellence of Christ. There was in each of them a singular and unswerving loyalty to Christ that spoke of a citizenship in heaven that was always more precious to them than the applause of men."<sup>1</sup>

To be sure, we would not dream of placing these men and their writings alongside the Word of God. John Jewel (1522–1571), the Anglican apologist, once stated: "What say we of the fathers, Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome, Cyprian?... They were learned men, and learned fathers; the instruments of the mercy of God, and vessels full of grace. We despise them not, we read them, we reverence them, and give thanks unto God for them. Yet...we may not make them the foundation and warrant of our conscience: we may not put our trust in them. Our trust is in the name of the Lord."<sup>2</sup>

Seeking, then, to both honor the past and yet not idolize it, we are issuing these books in the series Profiles in Reformed Spirituality. The design is to introduce the spirituality and piety of the Reformed

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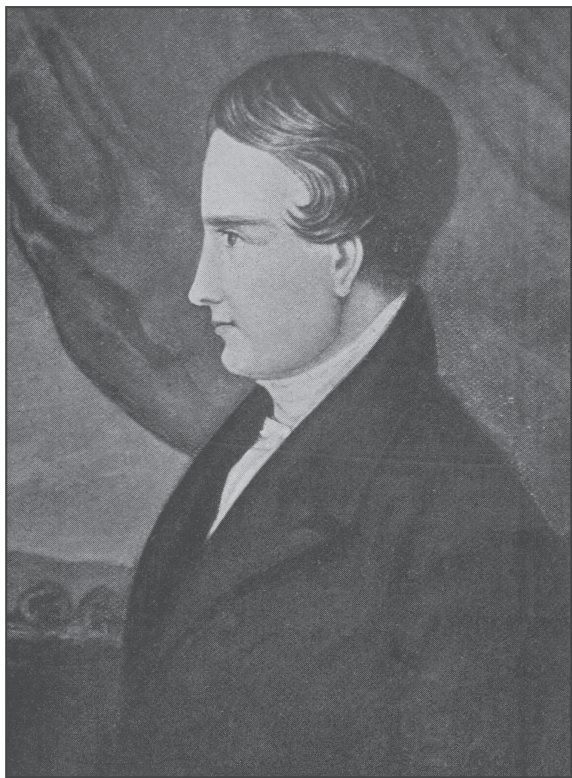
1. R. C. Sproul, "An Invaluable Heritage," *Tabletalk* 23, no. 10 (October 1999): 5–6.

2. Cited in Barrington R. White, "Why Bother with History?," *Baptist History and Heritage* 4, no. 2 (July 1969): 85.



tradition by presenting descriptions of the lives of notable Christians with select passages from their works. This combination of biographical sketches and collected portions from primary sources gives a taste of the subjects' contributions to our spiritual heritage and some direction as to how the reader can find further edification through their works. It is the hope of the publisher that this series will provide riches for those areas where we are poor and light of day where we are stumbling in the deepening twilight.

—Joel R. Beeke  
Michael A. G. Haykin



Robert Murray M'Cheyne

## The Piety of Robert Murray M'Cheyne (1813–1843)

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At the time of his birth, Robert Murray M'Cheyne's home country was in the midst of what one scholar calls "the golden age of Scotland."<sup>1</sup> The Industrial Revolution brought expansion in commerce and industry, and academics, literature, and science attracted thousands of devotees. Evangelical religion was also cresting in the land. As Andrew Bonar writes, "Eminent men of God appeared to plead the cause of Christ. The cross was being lifted up boldly in the midst of church courts which had long been ashamed of the gospel of Christ. More spirituality and deeper seriousness began...to prevail among the youth of our divinity halls. In the midst of such events...[M'Cheyne] was born."<sup>2</sup>

### **From Birth to Conversion (1813–1831)**

M'Cheyne was born in Edinburgh on May 21, 1813, to Adam and Lockhart M'Cheyne.<sup>3</sup> Adam

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1. G. M. Trevelyan, *English Social History* (London: The Reprint Society, 1948), 461.

2. Andrew Bonar, ed., *Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray M'Cheyne* (Dundee, Scotland: William Middleton, 1845), 1 (hereafter *MAR*).

3. The most extensive biographical work to date is David Victor

(1781–1854) was an ordinary lawyer at the time, but the next year he joined the Society of Writers to His Majesty's Signet, an ancient society that conducted cases before the Court of Session and enjoyed the exclusive right to prepare Crown writs, charters, and precepts. The new position brought Adam increased wealth and social advancement from the working class of his youth. He soon became “a man of social importance, who had more than an average share of the world's wealth and goods.”<sup>4</sup> The M'Cheyne family homes on Dublin Street, Queen Street, and later Hill Street were well-furnished, large, and

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Yeaworth, “Robert Murray McCheyne (1813–1843): A Study of an Early Nineteenth-Century Scottish Evangelical” (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1957). Modern biographies lean heavily on Yeaworth's work. Notable popular biographies include David Beaty, *An All-Surpassing Fellowship: Learning from Robert Murray M'Cheyne's Communion with God* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2014), 7–54; Marcus L. Loane, *They Were Pilgrims* (1970; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2006), 139–82; Derek Prime, *Robert Murray McCheyne: In the Footsteps of a Godly Scottish Pastor* (Leominster: Day One, 2007); David Robertson, *Awakening: The Life and Ministry of Robert Murray McCheyne* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2004); Alexander Smellie, *Biography of R. M. McCheyne* (1913; repr., Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 1995); and L. J. Van Valen, *Constrained by His Love: A New Biography on Robert Murray McCheyne* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2002). The most heralded biographical work is still Bonar's volume, found in Bonar, *MAR*, 1–170. Charles Spurgeon called it “one of the best and most profitable volumes ever published. Every minister should read it often.” C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students: A Selection from Addresses Delivered to the Students of the Pastors' College Metropolitan Tabernacle, London* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1890), 70n1.

4. Smellie, *Biography of R. M. McCheyne*, 23. For a more thorough account of Adam M'Cheyne's life and career, see Yeaworth, “Robert Murray McCheyne,” 1–7.

comfortable. Important ministers, military men, educators, and lawyers were frequent guests in the household. In addition to his role in the society, Adam was a political enthusiast (an unapologetic Tory) and firm disciplinarian who emphasized to his children the need for hard work and education.

Like her husband, Lockhart M'Cheyne (1772–1854) was the youngest in her family. Unlike Adam, however, she came from society's upper echelon. Her father was the proprietor of Nether Locharwood estate, "the most prosperous in Ruthwell parish," and she was thus accustomed to the comfortable lifestyle that Adam's position as writer would bring.<sup>5</sup> Whereas Adam displayed an oft-demanding and occasionally detached demeanor, Lockhart possessed noticeable charm and sweetness. Robert was close to both parents but shared a kindred spirit with his mother.

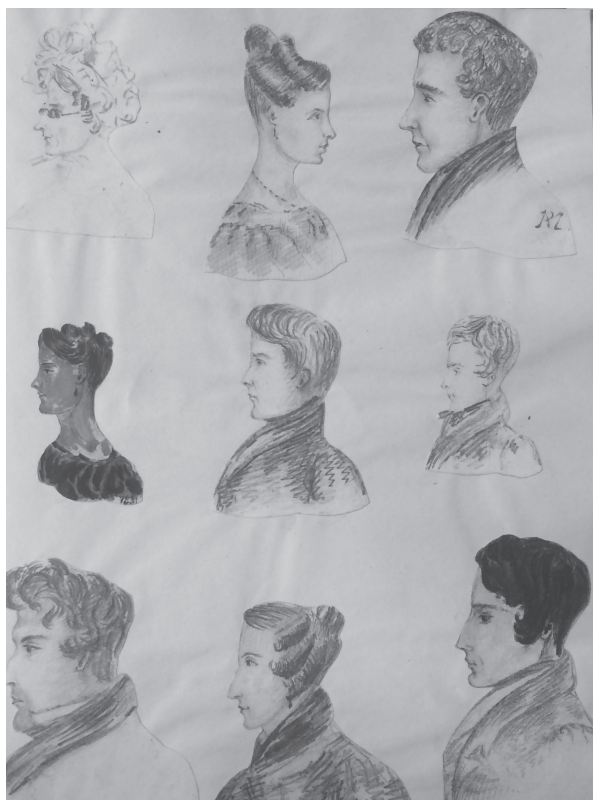
Adam and Lockhart wed in 1802. They had five children, Robert being the youngest. David Thomas (1804–1831) was the eldest, who followed his father into the legal profession and was "the pride of his home."<sup>6</sup> Next came Elizabeth Mary (1806–1888), Robert's constant companion and helper in his years at St. Peter's Dundee. Because she lived with Robert in adulthood and took care of his domestic affairs, Robert called her "my own Deaconess and helpmeet."<sup>7</sup> William Oswald (1809–1892) was the third M'Cheyne child. After studying medicine at Edinburgh, he went to India with the Bengal

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5. Yeaworth, "Robert Murray McCheyne," 7.

6. Smellie, *Biography of R. M. McCheyne*, 35.

7. Smellie, *Biography of R. M. McCheyne*, 22.



### **Drawing Portraits**

M'Cheyne loved to sketch portraits of friends and family members.

Medical Service in 1831, eventually retiring as a surgeon in the Honourable East India Company. Isabella was born in 1811 but died four months later.<sup>8</sup> None of the M'Cheyne children married.

### **An Educated Life**

The home of Robert's youth was a pleasant one. "The McCheyne children," Yeaworth reports, "were closely knit together, the elder ones patiently helping the younger and contributing to their happiness."<sup>9</sup> Adam's occupation provided relaxed living quarters and an atmosphere for intellectual growth. The M'Cheynes prized and pursued education. From the start, Robert displayed a keen aptitude for learning. Adam recounted how, at the age of four, Robert memorized the Greek alphabet "as an amusement" while recovering from an illness.<sup>10</sup>

Marcus Loane describes young Robert as "quick and alert, readily teachable, a natural and attractive boyish figure."<sup>11</sup> His manner was striking enough that one acquaintance wrote in 1889, "My recollections are of a tall slender lad with a sweet pleasant

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8. No biographer mentions the cause of death.

9. Yeaworth, "Robert Murray McCheyne," 12.

10. Van Valen, *Constrained by Love*, 16. The incident is notable because it shows not only M'Cheyne's intellectual commitment but also his frail disposition. Bouts with illness were constant from an early age.

11. Loane, *They Were Pilgrims*, 139. Bonar says, "From his infancy his sweet and affectionate temper was remarked by all who knew him." Bonar, *MAR*, 1. M'Cheyne himself agreed with the assessment, for he recorded in a diary entry on May 6, 1832, "[I am] naturally of a feeling and sentimental disposition." Bonar, *MAR*, 16.

face, bright yet grave, fond of play, and of a blameless life.”<sup>12</sup> M’Cheyne’s early interests were friends and achievement, especially regarding athletics (particularly gymnastics), poetry, and sketching. He was always among the most popular students in his class, and he routinely established himself as a leader among his peers. Two character traits fueled such relational success: a pleasant personality and disciplined ambition. He regularly won class prizes yet was disappointed to leave English school with only second prize, especially seeing that “his brother and sister had left with first prize before him.”<sup>13</sup>

M’Cheyne’s earliest letters and notebooks reveal a careful mind concerned with organization and neatness. As a sixteen-year-old, he wrote an essay titled, “On Early Rising,” which argued, “While sleep was necessary for babies and children, there came a time when it was more profitable to curtail the hours in which man wastes ‘the best and most useful part of his life in drowsiness and lying in bed.’”<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the earliest portrait of M’Cheyne is a lively one. The traits that would serve him so well in ministry, winsomeness and attractiveness, were present from the start.

M’Cheyne attended the English school from 1818 to 1821, proving most adept in recitation and singing. In 1821, M’Cheyne moved to the high school, where he cultivated a love for the classics and history:

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12. Charles Dent Bell, *Reminiscences of a Boyhood in the Early Part of the Century* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1889), 165.

13. Robertson, *Awakening*, 26.

14. Yeaworth, “Robert Murray M’Cheyne,” 15.



“Virgil, Horace, Ovid, and Tibullus enthralled him; and he did more than the required translations.”<sup>15</sup> M'Cheyne continued on to the University of Edinburgh in November 1827, “when it was basking in the glory of many outstanding professors, and when science and letters were at their zenith.”<sup>16</sup> He continued his study of the classics, relishing his Latin and Greek classes. He earned honors in every class and left the university with a well-formed mind and broad array of interests.

### **From Crisis to Christ**

M'Cheyne lived an outwardly religious life during his first eighteen years. His family attended the Tron Church in Edinburgh, where Alexander Brunton and William Simpson ministered. Brunton moderated the 1832 General Assembly and later served as professor of Hebrew and Oriental languages at the University of Edinburgh. M'Cheyne attended the catechism class between services, where friends remembered “his correct and sweet recitation” of various Scripture passages or answers to the Shorter Catechism.<sup>17</sup>

The M'Cheynes moved to the newly erected St. Stephen's in 1829, which, providentially, saw the family exchange a moderate ministry for one with pronounced evangelical leanings under the ministry of William Muir. M'Cheyne committed to serving in the church and engaging in its various ministries.

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15. Yeaworth, “Robert Murray McCheyne,” 25.

16. Yeaworth, “Robert Murray McCheyne,” 27.

17. Bonar, *MAR*, 2.

During the winters of 1829–1830 and 1830–1831, he attended Thursday night meetings in Muir’s vestry, becoming close with his minister.

M’Cheyne’s external piety was a mask that fooled many. Although Muir spoke glowingly of M’Cheyne’s “sound” principles and “exemplary” conduct,<sup>18</sup> M’Cheyne later reckoned his religious devotion as nothing more than a “lifeless morality.”<sup>19</sup> According to Andrew Bonar, M’Cheyne “regarded these as days of ungodliness—days wherein he cherished a pure morality, but lived in heart a Pharisee.”<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, a pervasive sense of happiness marked M’Cheyne’s early years. Putting his poetic pen to paper, M’Cheyne reminisced of his youth: “When the tears that we shed were tears of joy, and the pleasures of home were unmixed with alloy.”<sup>21</sup>

Yet as he concluded his collegiate work, storm clouds of suffering broke over the horizon of his carefree life. First, his brother William went to India under the Bengal Medical Service in April 1831. Until this point, all of M’Cheyne’s family members had lived near one another. William’s departure disrupted the family’s harmony and caused much anxiety, especially considering the unstable and potentially life-threatening conditions that prevailed in India. Second, and more significant, was the death of his eldest brother, David, on July 8, 1831. When William left for India, David was in bed suffering

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18. Quoted in Yeaworth, “Robert Murray McCheyne,” 22.

19. Quoted in Robertson, *Awakening*, 34.

20. Bonar, *MAR*, 2.

21. M’Cheyne, “Birthday Ode,” quoted in Yeaworth, “Robert Murray McCheyne,” 41.

from a serious fever. He never recovered, and his death struck a spiritual blow from which Robert never recovered. Marcus Loane writes, "Robert M'Cheyne had long looked up to [David] as the ideal of all that a true man should be, and his death touched him more deeply than words could well express."<sup>22</sup>

M'Cheyne was close with all his siblings, but he "regarded [David] as a youthful idol" and closely watched "his every action."<sup>23</sup> David was a converted Christian whose sense of eternal realities impressed Robert and challenged his younger brother's spiritual laxity. M'Cheyne memorialized David's influence in a poem titled "On Painting the Miniature Likeness of One Departed":

Ah! 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—!<sup>24</sup>

According to Bonar, David's piety radiated divine grace "with rare and solemn loveliness."<sup>25</sup> David took an interest in each family member's spiritual condition, counseling them to close with Christ. Not long into his ministry, M'Cheyne described his brother's influence in a letter to a young boy in his congregation:

I had a kind brother as you have, who taught  
me many things. He gave me a Bible, and per-

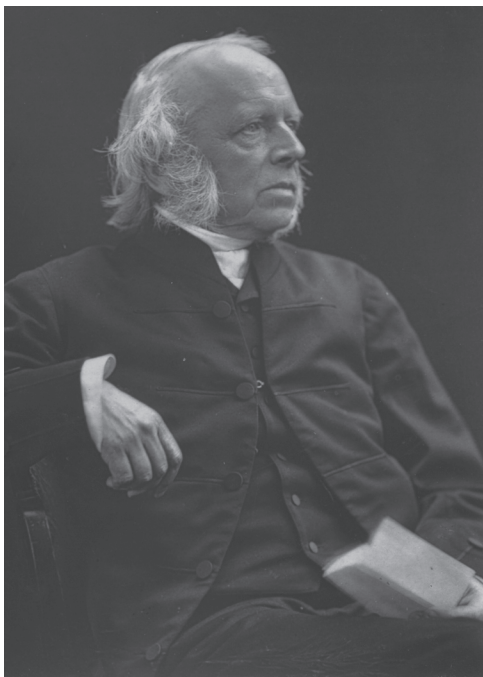
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22. Loane, *They Were Pilgrims*, 141.

23. Yeaworth, "Robert Murray McCheyne," 42.

24. Manuscripts of Robert Murray M'Cheyne, New College Library, Edinburgh, 1.13 (hereafter MACCH).

25. Bonar, *MAR*, 4.



**Andrew Bonar (1810–1892)**

M'Cheyne's close friend and confidant. Bonar authored and edited the best-selling *Memoirs and Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne*.

sueded me to read it; he tried to train me as a gardener trains the apple-tree upon the wall; but all in vain. I thought myself far wiser than he, and would always take my own way; and many a time, I well remember, I have seen him reading his Bible, or shutting his closet door to pray, when I have been dressing to go to some frolic, or some dance of folly.<sup>26</sup>

While the exact details of M'Cheyne's conversion remain a mystery, the catalyst is clear. "There can be no doubt," writes Bonar, that M'Cheyne "looked upon the death of his eldest brother, David, as the event which awoke him from the sleep of nature, and brought in the first beam of light to his soul."<sup>27</sup> George Smith, biographer of M'Cheyne's close friend Alexander Somerville, writes, "Robert M'Cheyne... had become a new man since the death of a brother."<sup>28</sup> Adam M'Cheyne similarly commented, "The holy example and the happy death of his brother David seem by the blessing of God to have given a new impulse to his mind in the right direction."<sup>29</sup>

M'Cheyne himself understood the key role that David's death played in his salvation. On the eleventh anniversary of losing his oldest sibling, M'Cheyne wrote, "This day eleven years ago, I lost my loved and loving brother, and began to seek a Brother who cannot die."<sup>30</sup>

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26. Bonar, *MAR*, 46.

27. Bonar, *MAR*, 4.

28. George Smith, *A Modern Apostle: Alexander Somerville* (London: John Murray, 1891), 10.

29. Quoted in Yeaworth, "Robert Murray McCheyne," 46.

30. Bonar, *MAR*, 9.

At his moment of spiritual crisis, M'Cheyne found no one to whom he could turn for counsel. He explained to a young parishioner,

This dear friend and brother died; and though his death made a greater impression upon me than ever his life had done, still I found the misery of being *friendless*. I do not mean that I had no relations and worldly friends, for I had many; but I had no friend *who cared for my soul*. I had none to direct me to the Saviour—none to awaken my slumbering conscience—none to tell me about the blood of Jesus washing away all my sin—to change the heart, and give the victory over passions. I had no minister to take me by the hand, and say, “Come with me, and we will do thee good.”<sup>31</sup>

With no living counselor available, M'Cheyne turned to books. He began with *The Sum of Saving Knowledge*, a short theological work typically appended to the Westminster Confession of Faith. The book, Bonar says, “brought him to a clear understanding of the way of acceptance with God.”<sup>32</sup> M'Cheyne penned in his diary years later, “Read in the *Sum of Saving Knowledge*, the work which I think first of all wrought a saving change in me.”<sup>33</sup>

Now assured of his salvation, M'Cheyne immediately devoted himself to Christ's service. Bonar notes, “His poetry was pervaded with serious thought, and all his pursuits began to be followed out in another

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31. Bonar, *MAR*, 47, emphasis original.

32. Bonar, *MAR*, 11.

33. Bonar, *MAR*, 11.

spirit. He engaged in the labours of a Sabbath school, and began to seek God to his soul, in the diligent reading of the Word, and attendance on a faithful ministry.”<sup>34</sup> M'Cheyne's subsequent diary entries reflect his newfound zeal: “I hope never to play cards again.... Never visit on a Sunday evening again.... Absented myself from the dance; upbraidings ill to bear. But I must try to bear the cross.”<sup>35</sup>

### **Training for Gospel Ministry (1831–1835)**

M'Cheyne's conversion coincided with a call to the ministry. David “used to speak of the ministry as the most blessed work on earth, and often expressed the greatest delight in the hope that his younger brother might one day become a minister of Christ.”<sup>36</sup> On September 28, 1831, M'Cheyne appeared before the Presbytery of Edinburgh and indicated his desire to enroll in the Divinity Hall at the University of Edinburgh. The presbytery found him to be proficient in all the required areas and encouraged him to proceed.

M'Cheyne matriculated into the thriving Divinity Hall in November 1831. It was at a time when “Thomas Chalmers was at the height of his amazing influence; no one since the days of John Knox had been held in such deep veneration.”<sup>37</sup> Chalmers taught the divinity courses and endorsed a ministerial pattern that M'Cheyne came to personify. Alexander Brunton, M'Cheyne's former minister,

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34. Bonar, *MAR*, 8.

35. Bonar, *MAR*, 10.

36. Bonar, *MAR*, 11.

37. Loane, *They Were Pilgrims*, 142.



### **Theological Seminary**

M'Cheyne studied theology and ministry at the Divinity Hall at the University of Edinburgh from November 1831 to March 1835.

was professor of Hebrew, and M'Cheyne especially relished his Hebrew lessons and instructions on ancient Eastern customs. M'Cheyne was already somewhat proficient in Hebrew, having taken a private class before entering the Divinity Hall, and the original language of the Old Testament delighted his soul. Near the end of his studies, he recorded in his diary, "Hebrew class—Psalms. New beauty in the original every time I read."<sup>38</sup> David Welsh, professor of church history, was the third faculty member. While Welsh's exacting historical lectures appealed

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38. Bonar, *MAR*, 13.



to M'Cheyne, it was his piety that most intrigued the young student: "[Welsh] influenced his students not only by his lectures but by his personal spiritual devotion to Christ and his obvious care and concern for them shone out."<sup>39</sup>

The faculty shaped M'Cheyne's pursuit of holiness and passion for Scripture by presenting a Savior who was lovely and compelling. M'Cheyne grew enormously under their training and derived additional spiritual support from his like-minded peers.

### **Friendships and Activities**

At the Divinity Hall, M'Cheyne deepened existing friendships and forged new ones, each proving significant for his future in gospel ministry. Two friends in particular are worth noting: Alexander Somerville and Andrew Bonar.

M'Cheyne began his ministerial studies at the same time as Somerville—a particularly close friend since high school. George Smith recalls how "the two boys passed from school to college in November 1827, and through the Arts classes, foremost in athletic sports, in dancing, and in youthful frolic. Both were handsome and accomplished in the social graces, were great favourites with their fellows, and were inseparable companions."<sup>40</sup> James Dodds remembered that M'Cheyne and Somerville "seemed literally inseparable; along with many others I was often amused at the closeness of their companionship. They sat beside each other in the classroom;

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39. Prime, *Robert Murray McCheyne*, 35.

40. Smith, *Modern Apostle*, 6.

they came and went together; they were usually seen walking side by side in the street; or if one of them turned round a corner, the other was sure to come a minute after. The one seemed to haunt the other like a shadow, and nothing, apparently, could separate the two friends.”<sup>41</sup>

The pair soon joined the Visiting Society at the Divinity Hall, which aimed “to set apart an hour or two every week for visiting the careless and needy in the most neglected portions of the town.”<sup>42</sup> M’Cheyne and Somerville concentrated on a district in the Canongate, teaching a Sunday school class and distributing the *Monthly Visitor*, a gospel tract the church circulated each month. The friends exchanged letters throughout M’Cheyne’s life and often assisted one another at Communion seasons.

During his first year of study, M’Cheyne also joined the Exegetical Society, which Thomas Chalmers created. It was “select in point of membership” because Chalmers wanted “none but the very *elite* of the Hall for taste and skill in the languages.”<sup>43</sup> It met each Saturday at 6:30 a.m., with members presenting exegetical papers and interacting on their interpretations. The meetings aimed to sharpen participants’ theological and biblical insight. The society was so beneficial that those students who remained during the summer holiday still met once a week. These meetings included an element of personal

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41. Quoted in Smith, *Modern Apostle*, 12.

42. Bonar, *MAR*, 22.

43. Yeaworth, “Robert Murray McCheyne,” 71, emphasis original.

accountability as each member shared the “amount and result” of their private Bible reading.<sup>44</sup>

The society’s roll numbered some sixteen students, and none became more precious to M'Cheyne than Andrew Bonar. Throughout their time at the Divinity Hall, M'Cheyne, Bonar, and Somerville could be found studying together and caring for each other’s spiritual well-being. For example, Bonar wrote in his diary on May 30, 1835: “In a walk round Duddingston Loch with Robert M'Cheyne and Alexander Somerville this afternoon, we had much conversation upon the leading of Providence and future days. We sang together, sitting upon a fallen oak-tree, one of the Psalms.”<sup>45</sup>

### Spiritual and Pastoral Developments

Growth in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ marked M'Cheyne’s years at the Divinity Hall. Increased piety matched his ever-increasing theological ability. His diary pants with longings to be more like Christ:

What right have I to steal and abuse my Master’s time? “Redeem it,” He is crying to me.<sup>46</sup>

Not a trait worth remembering! And yet these four-and-twenty hours must be accounted for.<sup>47</sup>

Oh that heart and understanding may grow

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44. Bonar, *MAR*, 27.

45. Andrew A. Bonar, *Andrew A. Bonar, D.D., Diary and Letters*, ed. Marjory Bonar (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1894), 27.

46. Bonar, *MAR*, 12.

47. Bonar, *MAR*, 12.



### **Loch in Edinburgh**

While at the Divinity Hall, M'Cheyne often spent extended hours in solitude at locations such as this loch near Arthur's Seat.

together, like brother and sister, leaning on one another!<sup>48</sup>

Oh for true, unfeigned humility!<sup>49</sup>

More abundant longings for the work of the ministry. Oh that Christ would but count me faithful, that a dispensation of the gospel might be committed to me!<sup>50</sup>

The desired “dispensation” came in due course. On February 16, 1835, one month before completing

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48. Bonar, *MAR*, 16.

49. Bonar, *MAR*, 17.

50. Bonar, *MAR*, 17.

his studies, M'Cheyne completed the mandatory examinations for licensure to preach the gospel. He recorded the previous night, "To-morrow I undergo my trials before the Presbytery. May God give me courage in the hour of need. What should I fear? If God see meet to put me into the ministry, who shall keep me back? If I be not meet, why should I be thrust forward? To thy service I desire to dedicate myself over and over again."<sup>51</sup>

M'Cheyne was unsure if he passed the exams in New Testament Greek, church history, and systematic theology. He told his brother William that the examiners "all heckled me, like so many terriers on a rat."<sup>52</sup> Yet his mother quickly assuaged any doubt by reporting, "Dr. Chalmers was highly pleased, and all the other ministers."<sup>53</sup> In the subsequent weeks, several ministers invited M'Cheyne to assist them. The standout offer came from John Bonar, minister at Larbert and Dunipace. Many considered Bonar's assistantship especially attractive, and M'Cheyne's friends urged him to heed the call. He accepted and applied to the Annan Presbytery to complete his trials.

On July 1, 1835, M'Cheyne submitted five linguistic and homiletic assignments: a Hebrew translation and analysis from Psalm 109, a lecture on Matthew 11:1–15, a homily on Matthew 7:13–14, a concise

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51. Bonar, *MAR*, 26.

52. Quoted in Smellie, *Biography of R. M. McCheyne*, 43.

53. Quoted in Smellie, *Biography of R. M. McCheyne*, 43.

commentary on Romans 3:27–28, and a sermon on Romans 5:11.<sup>54</sup> M'Cheyne wrote in his diary,

Preached three probationary discourses in Annan Church, and, after an examination in Hebrew, was solemnly licensed to preach the gospel by Mr. Monylaws, the moderator.... What I have so long desired as the highest honour of man, Thou at length givest me—me who dare scarcely use the words of Paul: “Unto me who am less than the least of all the saints is this grace given, that I should preach the unsearchable riches of Christ.” Felt somewhat solemnized, though unable to feel my unworthiness as I ought. Be clothed with humility.<sup>55</sup>

M'Cheyne did not officially begin his labors in Larbert and Dunipace until November 7, 1835. In July, he preached his first sermons as a licensed minister in Henry Duncan's Ruthwell Church. The great solemnity he felt was missing upon licensure came when he ascended to the sacred desk for the first time. He wrote later that day, “Found it a more awfully solemn thing than I had imagined to announce Christ authoritatively; yet a glorious privilege!”<sup>56</sup>

### **Life in Ministry (1835–1843)**

In accepting the call to assist John Bonar, M'Cheyne confessed, “It has always been my aim, and it is my prayer, to have *no plans* with regard to myself, well assured as I am, that the place where the Saviour

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54. Yeaworth, “Robert Murray McCheyne,” 79n1.

55. Bonar, *MAR*, 31.

56. Bonar, *MAR*, 32.

## SECTION ONE



# The Nature of Holiness

THE  
SUM OF SAVING KNOWLEDGE:

OR,

A BRIEF SUM OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE.

CONTAINED IN

THE HOLY SCRIPTURES, AND HOLDEN FORTH IN THE  
WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH  
AND CATECHISMS;

TOGETHER WITH

THE PRACTICAL USE THEREOF.

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JOHN vi. 37.—All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him  
that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.

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EDINBURGH:  
JOHNSTONE, HUNTER, & CO.

**The Sum of Saving Knowledge**

M'Cheyne read *The Sum of Saving Knowledge* while yearning for conversion and later called it "the work which I think first of all wrought a saving change in me."





## Devotion to Christ

Luther used to say that “*temptations, afflictions, and prayer*, made a minister.” I do trust that your Society may be greatly blessed, *first*, in the comforting, enlivening, and sanctifying of your own souls, and *then* in the bringing others to know the same fountain where you have found peace and purity. Let Jesus come into your meetings and sit at the head of the table. It is a fragrant room when the bundle of myrrh is the chief thing there. Let there be no *strife* among you, but *who* to be the lowest at His feet, *who* to lean their head most fully on His breast. Let all your conversation, meditations, and readings lead you to the Lamb of God. Satan would divert your minds away to questions and old wives’ fables, which gender strife. But the Holy Spirit *glorifies* Jesus—*draws* to Jesus—*makes you cleave* to the Lord Jesus with full purpose of heart. Seek advance of personal holiness. It is for this the grace of God has appeared to you (see Titus 2:11–12). For this Jesus died; for this He chose you; for this He converted you, to make you holy men—living epistles of Christ—monuments of what God can do in a sinner’s heart. You know what true holiness is. It is *Christ in you the hope of glory*. Let Him dwell in you, and so all His features will shine in your hearts and faces. Oh, to be like Jesus! This is heaven, wherever

it be. I think I could be happy among devils if only the old man were slain in me, and I was made altogether like Jesus! But, blessed be God, we shall not be called to such a trial, for we shall not only be like Jesus but be with Him to behold His glory. 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." Arrange beforehand what you have to pray for. Do not forget *confession of sin* nor *thanksgiving*. Pray to get your closed lips opened in intercession; embrace the whole world and carry it within the veil. I think you might with advantage keep a small book in which you might mark down objects to be prayed for. I pray God to make you very useful in the parish and in the world. Do all things without murmuring and disputing (see Phil. 2:14, 16). Live for eternity. A few days more, and our journey is done.

—from *Memoir and Remains of*  
*Robert Murray M'Cheyne*, 294–95



## Obedience to Christ

Matthew was sitting at the receipt of custom when Jesus passed by. He was lying in his blood, when Jesus said, "Live." How wonderful is the grace of the Lord Jesus. Some of you may be living in an evil calling, or in your sins. Look up, the Lord Jesus this night may turn His eye upon you.

*A simple word is blessed*—"FOLLOW ME." No argument. It is probably he had heard of Christ, heard Him preach, seen the preceding miracle; still he was at his old trade, till Jesus said, "*Follow Me.*" A little word reached Matthew's heart. We often make great mistakes—often make use of long arguments to bring people to Christ. Often we make use of long, high-sounding words, and expect them to be blessed, whereas it is the simple exhibition of Christ that is carried home by the Spirit. If we could only set before you Him who is love embodied, and if the Spirit but breathe on the word, these little words, "Follow Jesus," would break your soul away from all the world to follow Him. Speak for Christ. One little word may be blessed. "Follow Jesus" may win a soul.

*The soul that has once seen the loveliness of Christ, leaves all for Him.*

I doubt not that Jesus gave Matthew a glimpse of His excellency. He felt the savor of divine love.

He saw the gold—the pearl. What is all the world to him now? He cares not for its gain, its pleasures, its reproaches. In Christ he sees what is sweeter than all.

So *you*, if you have got a glimpse, you will not commune with flesh and blood. You will bid farewell to all. Farewell, gains of sin—pleasures of sin: in Christ I see a sweeter pleasure—a richer pearl.

Matthew *made a great feast* and brought publicans. When he found that Jesus was so precious to a publican, he went and gathered all his fellow-sinners to meet with Jesus. It is probable he said within himself, “I have often enticed them to sin; many a feast I have made; we have eaten and drunk together; now let me try and bring them to Jesus.”

You who have been called by Christ, can you do nothing to bring others to Him? You know that is possible for such to be *saved*. You may have helped them in sin. Can you not *now* bring them to meet with Jesus? How many contrivances you might fall upon, if you had the compassion of Jesus.

Oh, that Christians had more mercy, more of the bowels of Paul—of the Spirit of Christ!

—from *The Believer's Joy*, 83–87



## Complete Conformity to Christ

I come now to...*the use of the gospel ministry*, Ephesians 4:12. I observe from these words that the use of the gospel ministry is twofold: it is for perfecting those that are saints and then for the edifying of the body of Christ.

*To perfect the saints.* This is one great half of the word of the ministry. It is the same that Christ spoke of to Peter, "Lovest thou me?" then "Feed my lambs, feed my sheep." It is the same as what Peter wrote, "The elders which are among you I exhort. Feed the flock of God which is among you." It is the same which Paul spoke of to the Ephesian elders, "Take heed to the flock over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God which he hath purchased with his own blood." Now, this is the one great half of the gospel ministry, to feed the lambs and the sheep. I feel, brethren, that I have greatly omitted this part of my ministry among you because of the cry of the wicked; they are so many. Often in my secret retirement, when poring over my Bible, I have been driven past these texts which are for the perfecting of the saints, to be made a son of thunder. Observe, brethren, that the pastoral work is twofold: we are to perfect you in knowledge and we are to make you perfect in practice.

We are to perfect you in knowledge. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he told them that they came behind in no gift. Ah! I feel that this does not apply to us. I fear that the words of Paul to the Hebrews are more applicable: “For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God.” How little knowledge believers as yet have of their own hearts, how little knowledge you have of Christ, how little knowledge of the wiles of the devil, how much need have we to become *more fully acquainted* with the Word of God. The other half of pastoral work is to make you perfect in practice. Many among you think that it is not desirable to be complete Christians. Now, this is a great mistake; the object of the gospel ministry is to get you entirely like Christ—is to get you entire Christians—Christians in public and Christians in private.

—from *Basket of Fragments*, 76–77