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"Not slothful in business: fervent in spirit."

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For the Christian Messenger.

REVIEW.

Memoir of the Rev. William C. Burns, M. A., Missionary to China from the English Presbyterian Church. By Rev. Islay Burns, D. D., Professor of Theology, Free Church College, Glasgow. 12 mo. pp. 595. Nisbet & Co., London.

William Chalmers Burns was born at Dun in Angus, April 1, 1815. His father, the Rev. W. H. Burns, D. D., was the minister of that parish. He removed to Kilsyth in Stirlingshire in 1821.

William received the elements of his education in the parish school. He was then placed in the Grammar School of Aberdeen, at that time under the charge of the Rev. Dr. Melvin, who was a teacher possessed of rare attainments, and distinguished for thoroughness. From the Grammar School William proceeded to the University of Aberdeen, and went partially through the course of study in that institution with great credit. He "obtained honourable distinction in all his classes."

Having determined on the legal profession as the occupation of his life, he commenced the study of the law in the office of an uncle at Edinburgh, in the autumn of 1831, on leaving home, his father had given him a copy of Pike's "Persuasives to Early Piety." Mr. Pike was an English minister, of the General Baptist denomination: the book now mentioned has been extensively circulated, with great benefit to the souls of many. The effect of the perusal of this work is thus, described in a letter written by Mr. Burns in 1841, on occasion of a visit to Edinburgh.

"I walked along York Place, and looked up to the windows of a room (No. 41, west side upper flat) where, when reading Pike's 'Early Piety' on a sabbath afternoon, I think about the middle of December, 1831 an arrow from the quiver of the King of Zion was shot by his Almighty sovereign hand through my heart, though it was hard enough to resist all inferior means of salvation. * * * From this I walked down and revisited my old lodgings, No. 69 Broughton place, where my earliest days as a child of grace were spent, and where first the spirit of God shone with full light upon the glory of Jesus as a Saviour for such as I was. This was, I think, about the 7th of January, 1832. Although it was then, I remember, that the light of God first shone fully and transportingly on his word, and into my heart. I was never from the beginning, three weeks before, in utter darkness, but felt that God had been always willing to save me, that I was a self-murderer, and that now he was in his own sovereignty touching my heart and drawing me to himself for his own glory; and again, though about the time mentioned, I remembered to have beheld transporting wonders in God's law, yet my peace following on this was far different indeed from a settled quiet frame of mind. I had many fears and many awful struggles with sin and Satan and many sleepless nights of mingling joy and fear, and faith and hope, and love." p. 26.

The change of heart was immediately followed by a determination to devote himself to the Lord's service in the ministry of the gospel. He resumed his studies in the University of Aberdeen, and took his degree "with distinction" in 1834. In the winter of that year he commenced theological studies in the University of Glasgow. He soon became known as a diligent and most devoted young man. His spare time was spent in religious associations and benevolent efforts, especially among the young. The earnestness with which he engaged in those efforts, and his effective methods of teaching attracted much attention, and induced the expectation that a distinguished career was before him.

"Thus was he passing more and more within the deep shadow of that work to which he had devoted his life, and the commencement of which was now so nearly approaching. How solemnly that shadow

fell upon him may be partly gathered from an incident which was related to me recently by one who of all others knew him the earliest and the best. She had gone to Glasgow, unknown to him, on some domestic errand, and was passing through the narrow covered street called the Argyle Arcade, when she saw him turn the corner in front, and advance slowly towards her from the opposite direction as in deep reverie. Though she went up straight to him he was quite unconscious of her presence, and started, when addressed, as from a dream. 'O mother,' said he with deep emotion, 'I did not see you: for when walking along Argyle Street just now, I was so overcome with the sight of the countless crowds of immortal beings eagerly hastening hither and thither, but all posting onwards towards the eternal world, that I could bear it no longer, and turned in here to seek relief in quiet thought.' The great deep had been stirred up once more, but by a mightier and more sacred impulse "than in former days." p. 52.

Mr. Burns was licensed to preach March 27, 1839. About a fortnight afterwards he took charge of the Rev. Robert McCheyne's church, St. Peter's, Dundee, that eminent servant of God having departed on his mission to Palestine. It was a very serious undertaking for so young a man, and some entertained fears for the result. "I have heard old members of the congregation tell how their hearts trembled for him, when they saw what seemed to them a mere stripling standing up in the place of one whom they so revered and honoured, and how almost at the first sound of his voice, as he led with such deep-toned spirituality and power the prayers of the sanctuary, their fears vanished, and they seemed to hear only the sound of his Master's feet behind him." They would not have feared if they had known the spirit in which the young preacher entered on his work. He lodged with one of the elders of the church. An inmate of the family at that time writes thus:—

"The day after he came to us, Mr. Thomas took him out to show him the boundaries of the parish, and to see a few of the people in St. Peter's district. They returned in the evening. Mr. Burns went to his room, and whilst we waited for his coming down stairs to dinner, we heard a heavy groan. Thinking he had been taken ill, Mr. Thomas ran up stairs, and found him lying on his face on the floor groaning before the Lord! He had gotten such an overwhelming sense of his responsibility for the souls of that people, that he could then think of nothing else. In his absence of mind he had left his door partially open which Mrs. Thomas shut; and we did not see him again till late in the evening, when he came down for family worship. His prayer then was one continued strain of self-loathing, and pleading for mercy through 'the blood of the Lamb of God.' It happened that his room was next to mine, and all that night I heard him still groaning in prayer!"

An office-bearer in the church gives the following account of his preaching at Dundee:—

"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, Mr. Burns wielded an influence over the masses whom he addressed which was almost without parallel since the days of Wesley and Whitefield. Crowds flocked to St. Peter's from all the country round; and the strength of the preacher seemed to grow with the incessant demands made upon it. 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. With him there was no effort at oratorical display, but there was true eloquence; and instances are on record of persons, strong in their self-confidence and enmity to the truth, who fell before its power.—who,

'Though they came to scoff,
Remained to pray.' p. 61.

In the summer of that year there was a remarkable visitation of mercy at Kilsyth. Mr. Burns spent a short time there, and laboured incessantly among the people, receiving in his own soul abundant manifestation of the grace of God, and enjoying rich experiences of the power and preciousness of the gospel. Referring to his sermon at one of the meetings (from Psalm 110. 3.) he says. "I was led to plead with the unconverted before me *instantly* to close with God's offer 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 a rushing mighty wind of Pentecost! During the whole of the time that I was speaking the people listened with the most riveted and solemn attention, and with many silent tears and inward groanings of the spirit; but at the last their feelings became too strong for all ordinary restraints, and broke forth simultaneously in weeping and wailing, tears and groans, intermingled with shouts of joy and praise from some of the people of God. The appearance of a great part of the people from the pulpit gave me an awfully vivid picture of the state of the ungodly in the day of Christ's coming to judgment. Some were screaming out 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 (as Isaiah 55, Rev. 22 17), I was obliged to give out a psalm, which was soon joined in by a considerable number, our voices being mingled with the mourning groans of many prisoners sighing for deliverance." p. 95.

The biographer states that "the movement thus begun, in a manner so remarkable, went on steadily, and for weeks thereafter seemed only to grow in solidity and depth. Meetings for prayer and preaching of the gospel were held every successive night, generally in the church, and occasionally, when the weather favoured, in the market-place or in the churchyard. Crowds of inquirers flocked at every invitation to the vestry or the manse to seek spiritual counsel from the minister or his assistants. Prayer-meetings both of old and young sprang up everywhere in the village and the surrounding hamlets. * * * The mountain glen, the solitary haugh, even the noisy loomshop became vocal often with the sounds of prayer and praise, or witnessed the solemn converse of brethren who, at eventide talked with burning hearts of the things that had come to pass in those days. The whole tone and spirit of the place seemed for the moment changed, and an air almost Sabbath brooded over it, which strangers recognised as with instinctive reverence they approached the spot." A mighty change for the better was witnessed. Swearing and foolish talking ceased to be heard in the streets: volumes of infidelity and impurity were committed to the flames; the places of worship were thronged with hearers; hardened sinners were converted; and church members generally were quickened into new life. pp. 98—100.

On returning to Dundee Mr. Burns found a spirit of awakening in that place which produced scenes of wonderful interest. The excitement was astonishing. "From day to day and from week to week the sacred work of this remarkable time went on—the church nightly thronged with arrested and deeply solemnized multitudes, and every other available hour occupied with individual inquirers, who in very deed sought the eternal wisdom 'as silver, and searched for her as for hid treasure.' Twenty, thirty, forty, would often come to him on this errand in a single day, gathering in little groups in an outer chamber and pouring out their hearts in united prayer, or in silent and solitary breathings as they waited each their turn for a personal interview. Generally at the public assemblies a large part of the audience would remain after the regular services were concluded, for further instruction; and even when all was over, often at a late hour

eager groups would still cling around the preacher as he retired to the vestry, in hope of hearing still some last words of parting counsel and prayer. Occasionally even then it was scarcely possible to shake off the importunate crowds who hung upon the lips of Christ's ambassador as for their lives." p. 119.

It was not by preaching only that Mr. Burns sought to arouse concern for the salvation of the soul. He was continually looking out for opportunities to do good, no time was unseasonable, no place unsuitable; and he always had "a word in season." One day he met two boys going home from school who "seemed very ignorant of Jesus." He talked with them, gave them tracts, and "shortly prayed with them on the road." Farther on he met "widow Mitchell and her daughter Agnes," and with them he prayed, "going for a little into the house." At another time when he was in Perth, the following entry occurs in his diary:—"In the evening I met a great many young men in the vestry and found among them a great number of interesting cases. At eight o'clock I visited the prayer-meeting of females in Miss Ramsay's, which was very full and interesting. Coming out I saw behind a public-house some men and women sporting themselves, and went up and said, 'You are making work for the day of judgment.' They all ran in except one young man, a son of the house-keeper; he was subdued. I asked him if he would allow me to go in and pray. I got into a large room; many assembled, and we had a very solemn meeting. They all promised to come out to the meetings." A fortnight afterwards he learned that the public-house keeper, in which he had been "so remarkably led in God's providence to hold a meeting; had given intimation to his landlord that he was going to give up his shop at the next term, and leave the spirit-trade." p. 144.

He spent some months at Perth and its neighbourhood. The effects of his labours there were summarily stated in a report to the presbytery. "God's people quickened; backsliders restored; the doubting and uncertain brought to decision and assurance; hidden ones, who for years had walked solitarily brought to light and united to a family of brothers and sisters; a number of the worldly, thoughtless, ignorant, self-righteous turned to the Lord; a peculiar people growing up, who are separate from the world, know and love one another, watch over, exhort and aid one another, and seem to grow in humility and zeal." p. 157.

In the spring of 1840, and again in the autumn, Mr. Burns was engaged in the same work in Aberdeen. He sometimes preached to immense crowds in the open air. Here is the record of one evening's work:—

"In the evening (April 26) I preached in Castle Street to an immense audience, chiefly men, on the willingness of Jesus to save the chief of sinners, from the thief on the cross. I felt more of the divine presence than on any former occasion in Aberdeen and laboured to pull sinners out of the fire. The impression was very deep; many weeping, some screaming, and one or two quite overpowered. At eight o'clock we adjourned to the North Church, where Mr. Wilson from Belfast was preaching, and when he had concluded we remained with a crowded audience for another hour, in exhortation, prayer and praise. After this we dismissed the people; but a great many were so deeply moved that we could not get away, and accordingly I returned with Mr. Murray, who addressed along with me about four hundred from the preacher's desk. After prayer and singing, we dismissed about ten o'clock. Getting with difficulty out of the crowd, I went down to Albion Street, and addressed in a school-room about seventy of the poorest and vilest of the people in that degraded district. They were very solemn and interested to all appearance. We separated about eleven. Though this was a day of uncommon toil, yet, praise to the Lord, I was not worn out, but felt strong as ever on my way home." p. 160.

(To be continued.)