

'Of Common Ilk'

Spiritual Friendship as a Means of Grace
in the lives of
Robert Murray M'Cheyne and His Companions

Clint Humfrey

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[Toronto Baptist Seminary](#)

Friendship born in a foxhole never dwindles. In the toils of battle, and stench of death a strange life-giving aura rises from the field as two compatriots are welded together in their souls. Only battle can produce such a connection, as the lifelong friendships of war veterans can attest. Much more so, the bonds which are birthed in *spiritual* conflict. Such a "struggle" as the Apostle Paul calls it, "is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places"(Eph. 6:12). If the battle be otherworldly, should not also the camaraderie engaged in it? Truly Christians throughout the centuries have affirmed the 'peculiar' nature of their bonds of friendship which were owned by God for the advancement of His kingdom. Unions of this kind are, as they say in Scotland, 'of common ilk', and it is Scotland in particular, which has seen a most powerful example of *spiritual* friendship as a means of grace --- Robert Murray M'Cheyne and his companions¹.

The First Bonds

The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed the spread of a new work of grace in the souls of Scotland. Decay had pervaded the religious life of the land, and the need for awakening was acute. God, in His wisdom, raised up not just one man, but a number of men who would be His weapons in lighting the darkness. God began recruiting a selection of men for his service, by first converting them, and later calling them to ministerial service. These men were pooled together by His Providence at Divinity Hall, Edinburgh, where God used another special instrument, Thomas Chalmers, to shape their lives. Professor Chalmers instructed them in accurate thinking about God and His universe, as well as effective planning in order to be highly 'useful' in the practical spread of the Visible and Invisible Church². When in school, these students would band themselves together in 'Societies'. One 'Society', known as '*the Exegetical*' would hold significance beyond anything the members perceived. A young '*Exegete*' recalls his impressions:

[N]o society of this kind was more useful and pleasant to us than one which, from its object, received the name of *Exegetical*. It met during the session of the Theological classes every Saturday morning at half past six. The study of Biblical criticism, and whatever might cast light on the word of God, was our aim; and these meetings were kept up regularly during four sessions³.

It was in the *Exegetical* that the future of Scotland lay. The members of this group joined together to become comrades-in-arms in the cause of Christ, and many would be blessed with spiritual awakening in connection to their later ministries. Many of the names belonging to the Society would read, in hindsight, like a who's who of Evangelical leadership for that time --- Horatius Bonar, Andrew A. Bonar, Robert M. M'Cheyne, Alexander Somerville, et al⁴. God was spearheading a new offensive!

One of the members, Andrew Bonar, sought friends to whom he could "unbosom himself". He concluded, "God alone has been my Counsellor and Teacher...I should never complain [but] I sometimes think myself neglected by friends and others."⁵ His

prayer to the Truest Friend was answered, when God provided a like bosom in Robert Murray M'Cheyne. Bonar records:

It was about the time of his first year's attendance at the [Divinity] Hall that I began to know [M'Cheyne] as an intimate friend. During the summer vacations, --- that we might redeem the time, --- some of us....used to meet once every week in the forenoon, for the purpose of investigating some point of *Systematic Divinity*, and stating to each other the amount and result of our private reading....Advancement in our acquaintance with the Greek and Hebrew Scriptures also brought us together; and one summer the study of *Unfulfilled Prophecy* assembled a few of us once a week, at an early morning hour.⁶

M'Cheyne was graced with godliness beyond his years, and Bonar stayed very close to one who revealed so much of Christ. Together, they, along with the larger circle of students, studied, discussed, and applied the precious truths they were learning in class, while using one another as whetstones for sharpening. Verily, as "iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another"(Pr.27:17), and Andrew was sharpened most by Robert. Andrew would later describe M'Cheyne's distinction saying:

...the impression left was chiefly that there had been among them a man of peculiar holiness. Some felt, not so much his words, as his presence and holy solemnity, as if one spoke to them who was standing in the presence of God; and to others his prayers appeared like the breathings of one already within the veil.⁷

Another companion who joined the troop was Alexander Somerville. Having come to saving faith at around the same time as Robert, Alexander became a similar heart welded to the chain. Alexander would become a dear friend to Andrew as well, so that all three men extended intersecting graces to one another. A description of M'Cheyne and Somerville's relationship, would easily apply to Bonar's bond with each one. Andrew recalls:

Mr. Alexander Somervillewas [M'Cheyne's] familiar friend and companion in the gay scenes of his youth...[H]aving been brought to taste the powers of the world to come, they united their efforts for each other's welfare. They met together for the study of the Bible, and used to exercise themselves in the Septuagint Greek and Hebrew original. But oftener still they met for prayer and

solemn converse; and carrying on all their studies in the same spirit, watched each other's steps in the narrow way.⁸

All three would seek Christ together, preparing one another for the days ahead. They sought to know Christ and make Him known, yet they did not know the specifics of where their paths were to run. Many were the occasions such as this one remembered by Bonar:

Saturday, 30th. --- 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.⁹

The freeness of heart expressed in praise, as well as the mutual concern regarding the acts of God in each fellow's life typified these friendships. Due to this God-centred characteristic, they can be deemed none other than truly '*spiritual*' friendships. As well, the quality of these relationships was not limited to the three aforementioned men. Indeed, at least seven men (but more likely ten to twelve)¹⁰ enjoyed these sweet fellowships one with another, and could testify to many such 'walks' where edifying counsel was in ample supply. These men were the tools of the Master for their mutual refinement. Amazingly, a number of useful tools were collected in Scotland's realm, honing each other during a common age.

Friendship as a Means of Grace

For Encouragement

One example of the importance of these relationships for the spiritual growth and progressive sanctification of the young ministers, is in the case of Somerville and Bonar. Andrew had been sent to Jedburgh to assist his cousin's husband, Mr. Purves, with the pastoral work there. As it was the beginning of his ministerial career, the time at Jedburgh would prove very formative for Andrew. Interestingly, Alexander Somerville arrived as a tutor in the nearby town of Edgerston which caused Bonar to note, "the providence that led to this"¹¹. Clearly, these new apprentices needed the support of each other's kindred spirit close at hand. Bonar expresses his appreciation as he says,

"Alexander Somerville has been very useful to me, and though at present he is doubtful of remaining, yet I pray God that it may yet be ordered that he shall."¹² The spiritual quickening which Somerville and Bonar felt, could easily be likened to their times with M'Cheyne as well. "On one Monday evening", Bonar recalls, "I walked up with Alexander Somerville to Edgerston. We sang and repeated psalms by the way, and in our room we had a season of prayer together such as I seldom have enjoyed more"¹³

For Refinement

The significant Providence of God which brought Alexander Somerville to Edgerston, so near Andrew Bonar, and at such a needy time, is the same Providence that would lead Somerville away from the area, for both men's spiritual benefit. Just as the presence of like-minded soul is a source of spiritual encouragement, so too is the absence of a spiritual friend a source of the divine refining process. It was in this manner that, Andrew Bonar was to be refined by the departure of his bosom friend Somerville¹⁴. With none to whom he could 'unbosom his heart', Andrew was forced to rely again on the Friend of Sinners, Christ Jesus, much like he had to do when beginning in University. As with all good things, the tendency for Bonar was to take for granted the sweet fellowship he enjoyed with Somerville. Bonar says upon reflection, "And this very great lesson I have so far learned, that God alone, in the absence of friends, with none to sympathize, can be the joy and portion of my soul."¹⁵

Later journal entries of Bonar's show the changing heart which the Spirit of God was superintending. While yet immature, his attachment to friends led him to a sweeter communion with Christ. Later, sin would have such friends be idols competing with the Lord. The removal of his comforts caused Bonar to write in his journal, "Altogether have felt of late somewhat as I suppose *death* would make me feel in parting from friends; and often I have rejoiced in hope of our gathering together in Christ forever"¹⁶. A weaning needed to continue in Bonar's heart, as it must with all good things which, when corrupted by sin, take one's eyes off of Christ. The work was as sure to succeed as God's promise to conform His saints to the image of His Son. The humble conclusion by Bonar carries many sighs and groanings

behind the words when he writes, "For some days it seemed as if I had passed through a sort of death in coming away...If the Lord has brought me here He must have some work for me to do. I feel loosened from the earth, and longing for Christ's appearing."¹⁷ The lesson effectively learned by Bonar in this trial would become a foundation for his conscientious pursuit of Christ alone throughout his years.

For Challenge

The saints of Hebrews' 11, are referred to as being a 'great cloud of witnesses' from whom we take courage to run the race of faith, 'fixing our eyes on Jesus'(Heb.12:1). In the same way, godly peers can be challenging to their contemporaries. Robert Murray M'Cheyne was vitally used in this capacity during his brief life. The evident holiness and 'usefulness' of M'Cheyne made his affliction all the more noticeable. Andrew Bonar, for one, was distinctly challenged in his walk of faith, as he saw a deficiency of holiness in his own life compared to that of M'Cheyne. Surely the sight of the pregnant potential in M'Cheyne's labours that would go unrealized caused a great degree of self-examination on Bonar's part. In a New Year's Day journal entry from the dawn of his ministry Bonar writes:

1st January 1836.--- Spent this morning in meditation and prayer. Saw most strange providence leading me here, and bringing Alexander Somerville too, and so strengthening the hands of John Purves in this dark spot. To-day no less were we reminded of this, by hearing of Robert M'Cheyne's illness, he being threatened with consumption, and obliged to return home. God gives me no small blessing in permitting me to labour for Him in health, scarcely one single pain in my body all these past years; and He has given me, too, a field of labour and usefulness seldom bestowed on any so early and given me gifts which many have not. Oh, may this year be more spent in drawing continually out of the Fountain of life.¹⁸

The life that M'Cheyne lived was a visible challenge for Bonar, exhorting him to look to Christ. In this way a positive type of comparison was felt. Bonar saw the transparency of M'Cheyne, which allowed so much of Christ through, and it caused him to reflect upon his own opaqueness. Although comparison can lead

to man-pleasing and self-focus, this type of comparison was intended by God for the purpose of challenging a soul to more saturation with the glory of Christ and His graces. Bonar speaks of this comparison saying:

I have been struck at reflecting upon God laying aside M'Cheyne, who seems far more completely devoted to the work than I; and it has taught me that free grace and special goodness must be the only reasons why I have been sent here with health and strength. It cannot be because of my gifts of grace in the least degree.¹⁹

The challenge of positive comparison with M'Cheyne would stir Bonar for the rest of His life, and aided the latter's purpose to 'fix' his gaze upon Christ.

For Rebuke

The security found in a spiritual friendship stands uniquely among all relationships between sinners as a haven for honesty. Since the time of Adam and Eve hiding in the garden, mankind has sought to conceal reality, or to avoid it somehow. Only in the context of a God-aware relationship can reality be engaged honestly. The openness which existed between M'Cheyne and his fellows, taught a sinful humanity what it was like to be confidently aware of God, secure in the righteousness and atonement of Christ, and courageous to confront sin and rebuke iniquity.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne knew the importance of honesty in his spiritual friendships. His friends often recalled, "how faithfully and anxiously he used to warn his friends of whatever he apprehended they were in danger from".²⁰ Whether in snares of men-pleasing, sloth, coldness, or pride, M'Cheyne loved his friends and fellow labourers too much, to allow them to continue in their waywardness unchecked. M'Cheyne's care for others made him committed to telling them what they didn't prefer to hear, but what indeed they *needed* to hear. By true spiritual friendship, M'Cheyne copied the unwavering covenantal love of God for His people, which enabled him to rebuke those dear to him with the utmost love.

This type of 'tough love' was not unique to M'Cheyne only. The other friends practised it as well. Andrew Bonar, for instance,

came to express concern with young W. C. Burns' view of preaching. Burns thought it was "hurtful to speak too much and too often about 'look to Jesus'" which Bonar considered erroneous.²¹ A few months later, Bonar would note that he, "never heard William Burns preach so free a gospel".²² It would seem that Bonar's choice words and concerned rebuke left an impression upon his friend, keeping him from a by-path.

Rebuke is often difficult and painful. Like surgery, however, this type of confrontation is noblest of all amid the threat of cancerous sin. The presence of loving rebuke therefore, is an apt indicator of the presence of true spiritual friendship.

Characteristics of Spiritual Friendship

Unity distinguishes comrades from individuals. Men who are 'knit together in love'(Col.2:2) have not merely one strand of commonness, but multiple layers that cannot be isolated. Each thread of unity weaves with the other so that a flexing grid of strength upholds the members in a complementary way. Knit hearts have this intersecting love, which causes them to dwell in unity--a blessed thing, according to the Psalmist (Ps.133:1).

M'Cheyne and his fellows typified these descriptions of blessedness, unitedness, and like-mindedness. As an example, corporately, of spiritual friendships being means of grace, the 'ilk' of these men was of necessity God-rooted. A like-mindedness characterized their generation, and stood as a witness to the broad movement of God's Spirit in that day. To apprehend the common ilk of M'Cheyne's company, one must examine the individual cords of like-mindedness, many as they are, so that the whole can be seen by its parts. Three cords, in particular, will display this unity --- like devotion, like theology, and like burden.

Like Devotion

During the 19th century, a revolution of Christ-like piety overtook a number of young ministers in Scotland. Their devotion was consistently cut from the same pattern, that is, a progressive enthrallment with the Risen Saviour. Robert Murray M'Cheyne would model this enthrallment for the rest of his generation. His

piety is remembered by many friends through rich thoughts such as, "Ah! there is nothing like a calm look into the eternal world to teach us the emptiness of human praise, the sinfulness of self-seeking and vainglory, to teach us the preciousness of Christ, who is called 'The Tried Stone.'"²³ M'Cheyne's insatiable desire for communion with Christ set him apart. Andrew Bonar records the testimony of a lady greatly affected by M'Cheyne's ministry saying:

There is something singularly attractive about Mr. M'Cheyne's holiness...It was not his matter nor his manner either that struck me; it was just the *living epistle of Christ* -- a picture so lovely, I felt I would have given all the world to be as he was, but all the time I was dead in sins.²⁴

Bonar himself would say of M'Cheyne, "O what I wonder at in Robert Murray M'Cheyne more than all else is his simple feeling of desire to show God's grace, and to feed upon it himself".²⁵ M'Cheyne saw acutely his need of Christ, and more sweet communion with Him; he said, "But, oh! I need much the living Spirit to my own soul; I want my life to be hid with Christ in God. At present there is too much hurry, and bustle, and outward working, to allow the calm working of the Spirit on the heart".²⁶ It was M'Cheyne's conviction that personal holiness was the pre-eminent need of ministers who desire to be instruments in revival --- without it, there would only be confusion.²⁷ As his *Memoirs and Remains* would testify, the Christ besottedness of this man of God was indeed peculiar.

Others in the circle of friends had the same kind of devoted hearts. Andrew Bonar, for example, sought hard after God. John J. Murray describes him thus:

Entering within the veil through the blood of Christ was to him the chief exercise of the Christian life. It was for that reason that 'Christ and Him crucified' was at the very centres of his thoughts and of his preaching...He did not believe in any short-cut to holiness and usefulness in the work of God. He knew that the one and only way to grow in grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ was daily and hourly communion with the Father and the Son.²⁸

Bonar, in living a long life, proved to be a beacon of the holiness that marked the shortened life of his departed friend, M'Cheyne.

Another minister of note with these 'breathings after holiness' was William Burns. The young preacher who replaced M'Cheyne at St. Peter's, knew the enrichment of standing in the quickening presence of the Holy One. Burns' experiences were often similar to this recorded instance:

Edinburgh, November 1st. --- I spent the whole of this forenoon till half-past twelve in private with the Lord, and enjoyed more of his presence humbling and elevating my soul that I have had for some time past when alone (O! for a day every week to spend entirely in the secret of his presence!).²⁹

The expression of Burns' devotion, when recorded, sounds as if his friend M'Cheyne had written it. An example of this follows:

O scatter the clouds and mists of unbelief which exhale afresh from the stagnant marshes in my natural heart, the habitation of dragons, and pour afresh upon my ransomed soul a full flood of thy divine light and love and joy, in the effulgence of which all sin dies, and all the graces of the Spirit bloom and breathe their fragrance!³⁰

Burns' piety invaded many lives, among them Andrew Bonar who remembered William saying, "The single-mindedness, intense zeal, yet calmness, of William Burns, has often spoken to my heart with indescribable power."³¹ Remarkably, the testimony of one who knew Burns could easily have been said of M'Cheyne, the Bonars, Somerville or the host of ministers in that generation, in that, "[N]o one who ever spent the briefest time alone with him, or even met him casually by the way, could for a moment doubt that in the truest and fullest sense to him 'to live was Christ'".³²

Like Theology

The common devotion of these saints was rooted in a common belief and a like theology. Theirs was a particularly God-centred focus, that saw His sovereignty manifested through grace. Nicknamed Calvinism, this theocentric understanding of the teaching of the Scriptures was held by these men with a vibrancy and warmth that often escaped others of the same belief. This Calvinism was 'experimental' as the Puritans would say, not the dead orthodoxy that characterized many parishes. On top of this, these men emphasized the 'free offer of the gospel' while still

holding to the electing purpose, and particular redemption planned by God.³³ One name consistently influenced these men in shaping their understanding of the God-centred purposes for all things --- that name was Jonathan Edwards.

M'Cheyne's introduction to Edwards came around March, 1832 while in the Divinity Hall. He had been reading 'part of the Life of Jonathan Edwards',³⁴ and later bought his 'Works'.³⁵ The influence of Edwards upon M'Cheyne was profound, since the latter's preaching and philosophy consistently mimicked the heart religion of the former. M'Cheyne incorporated the study of Edwards' teaching into his own devotional routine since he considered them, "a mine to be wrought, and if wrought, sure to repay the toil."³⁶ The Scottish preacher would often refer to Edwards as an authority when evaluating the revivals that were sweeping through many parishes in that day.³⁷ As well, the 'Resolutions' of Edwards³⁸ and the journals of David Brainerd³⁹, were often appealed to in order to stir up affections for Christ and zeal for His name.

Andrew Bonar tasted the fruit of the Spirit's work in Edwards, as his friend M'Cheyne had. Bonar would summarize the appeal of the Edwardsean type theology (which was no less than biblical Christianity) saying, "Whitefield, Edwards, and Nettleton, never found themselves, nor those they addressed, hindered by these great truths; they were helped by them, not hindered. No wonder; for do not each of these doctrines (i.e. Calvinistic ones) at once turn our eye on *God himself*"?⁴⁰ William Burns fed on Edwards too. Since the young minister was greatly used in revival, he deferred to the New England divine for guidance as a shepherd in the midst of awakening just as M'Cheyne and Bonar did.⁴¹

One may ask, 'How did this Edwardsean influence get introduced?' Certainly, the source must needs be the precious mentor of their generation, Thomas Chalmers. Chalmers had been quickened in his own life through the witness of Edwards' writings, and he sought to share that same fire with his pupils.⁴² The God-centred theology that had aided Chalmers in converting from an unsaved Moderate, to a regenerated Evangelical, was the same theology that would awaken multitudes through the ministries of the young divines.

Like Burden

A cause united the passions of these men of God --- the cause of glorifying God through the salvation of sinners. Burdened by this common sense of duty, these warriors for joy desired to see masses congregated in worship of the Lamb slain. While still studying in the Divinity Hall, many of these men would have their hearts broken for the lost through their visitation of Edinburgh's poor. Thomas Chalmers led a prayer meeting before this visitation, and surely he would have impressed upon the young ministers the need to serve those without Christ. M'Cheyne would later say of his own parish and its "noisy mechanics and political weavers" that, "perhaps the Lord will make this wilderness of chimney-tops to be green and beautiful as the garden of the Lord, a field which the Lord hath blessed!"⁴³ These men had also been enlightened to the needs in foreign lands, and had been touched by the missionary zeal of another generation of Scots who preceded them.⁴⁴ William Burns, for example, would see revival under his ministry in Scotland, but would later go to China as the first missionary of the English Presbyterian Church. John Milne, another of this group of kindred hearts, would reflect on Burns saying:

I was struck with his close walk with God, his much and earnest prayer, his habitual seriousness, the solemnizing effect which his presence seemed to have wherever he went, and his almost unvaried success in leading those with whom he conversed to anxious, practical, heart searching concern about their state in God's sight. In public, his ministrations were chiefly of an awakening nature, addressed to the unconverted.⁴⁵

Robert M'Cheyne agonized for the lost, too. A simple servant girl testified that he was, "*deein* to hae folk converted".⁴⁶ And indeed he did die at a brief age of 29. All of the burdened men, who pined for the lost in prayer, and pleaded for them in preaching, were abundantly 'useful' in the expansion of Christ's visible Kingdom. 'Preaching Christ and Him crucified' as the hope for bankrupt sinners characterized each of M'Cheyne's friends. Truly, their burdens were of the same ilk.

Conclusion

God manifested His grace in a unique way through Scottish lips, the lips of Robert Murray M'Cheyne and his co-labourers. A troop of preachers, assembled with one heart and one mind, went forward into the fields of spiritual conflict waving a united banner of love. Bound by a burden, a belief, and a Christ, these precious friends were integrated into God's grace, through their love for one another. That love became a foretaste of heaven, and made them long for heaven all the more. These 'kindred spirits' had cried together, preached together, battled the world, the flesh, and the devil together, and remained 'unbosomed' together.

Finally, men of common ilk such as these are rarely gathered. Like the survivors of war, all of the battlers carried with them the memory of those who had fallen before. It was precious memories of that sort which propelled them to live --- and to live well. It seemed that the one who fell so early, left the deepest impression and was so instrumental as a friend and a means of grace. Andrew Bonar summed up the intense feeling which flooded over him at the news of Robert M'Cheyne's death on March 25th, 1843, he writes:

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. Arise, O Lord, the godly ceaseth and the faithful fail...Life has lost half its joys, were it not the hope of saving souls. *There was no friend whom I loved like him...I must myself live nearer to God, and find what he found"*⁴⁷
(italics mine).

Let us all look for a friend like him, to find what indeed he found, namely the presence of the Sinner's Friend, Christ the Lord!

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