

Reformation Series 2010  
(Lecture Five: The Life and Hymns of Horatius Bonar)

V. The Life and Hymns of Horatius Bonar (taken from Haykin and Brooker, *Christ Is All*, pp. 1-44.

A. Introduction.

1. “The remarkable spiritual awakening that took place at Cambuslang, at the time five miles southeast of Glasgow, in the spring and summer of 1742 is well known in the annals of revival. It began in the February of that year with the anointed preaching of William McCulloch (1691-1771), the parish minister, and grew to the point that in July, George Whitefield (1714 -1770), the leading evangelist of the eighteenth century, was preaching to crowds of 20,000 or more.
2. “Among the other ministers who also preached during those stirring days was one whom Whitefield called ‘good old Mr. Bonner.’ The preacher to whom Whitefield referred was the minister of Torphichen on the outskirts of Edinburgh, John Bonar (1671-1747), a man who had a ‘lively zeal for the interest of true religion.’ The revival appears to have given Bonar, who was quite infirm and unable either to ride or to walk any distance at all, a new lease on life. And though he took three days to travel the twenty three miles or so from Torphichen to Cambuslang, he preached three times when he got there with, it was said, ‘great Life.’ When he was about to return home, so filled with joy was he, that he used the words of another aged saint for his farewell: ‘Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, ... for mine eyes have seen thy salvation.’
3. “John Bonar’s evident longing for and delight in revival would characterize at least three of his great great-grandsons who were also ministers: John James Bonar (1803-1891), ordained the minister on August 20, 1825, of St. Andrew’s parish, Greenock, where he remained until the end of his long life; Horatius Bonar (1808-1889), the subject of this book; and Andrew Alexander Bonar (1810-1892), a number of whose books became devotional classics among Calvinistic evangelicals. These three Bonars were also brothers who maintained close ties throughout their long lives. For instance, they frequently preached for each other during communion seasons. G. N. M. Collins (1901-1989), for a number of years Professor of Church History in the Free Church College on the Mound in Edinburgh, knew some aged members of the Greenock church who vividly recalled from their youth a communion service in which all three brothers spoke: one on Christ as Prophet, one on Christ as Priest, and the third on Christ as King. Little wonder it was a service long remembered!
4. “At the outset, a major difficulty confronts anyone seeking to study Horatius Bonar’s life and piety, namely, the fact that there has never been an English biography written of him. In one sense this is quite unusual, for the world of nineteenth-century British Evangelicalism reveled in big biographies of those who were key figures in their community. In another sense, though, it is quite understandable, since Bonar himself gave strict instructions to his family and executors that there was to be no biography written of his life. However, in the twenty years following his death there did appear three items that help any would-be student of the life of this godly Scottish Presbyterian. *Horatius Bonar, D.D.: A Memorial* contains funeral sermons preached by

admirers of Bonar at the time of his death, some of Bonar's own sermons, and the first few pages of an autobiographical sketch that Bonar drew up in 1888 to celebrate his jubilee as a minister of the gospel but which he never finished. Then there is the *Memories of Dr. Horatius Bonar*, which consists of various short reminiscences about Bonar as a Christian and about his ministry and theological convictions. Most of them were written by those who had known Bonar, like David M. McIntyre (1859-1938), the colleague and successor of Horatius's younger brother Andrew in Finnieston, Glasgow. Finally, there is an essay, 'Horatius Bonar and His Hymns' (1904), which was written as an introduction to a large selection of his hymns by his only son to survive him, Horatius Ninian Bonar.

5. "As Iain Murray notes, Bonar's prohibition of a biography about his life stems from a desire for privacy and a fear of the flattery that often accompanies biographies. For him, what was most important was 'the work he had been given and he wanted no other memorial.'

## B. The Life and Hymns of Horatius Bonar.

### 1. Early years.

- a. "Horatius Bonar was born in Edinburgh on December 19, 1808. His parents, James Bonar (1757-1821), the Depute-Solicitor of Excise in Edinburgh, and Marjory Maitland (d. 1854), had nine children who survived infancy. James Bonar was an elder in Lady Glenorchy's Chapel, a bulwark of Edinburgh Evangelicalism that had been founded in 1774 with money donated by Lady Glenorchy (1741-1786), a wealthy patroness of Evangelical causes.
- b. "However, James Bonar died when Horatius was only thirteen, and thus the greatest influences on him during his early years were a godly mother and his eldest brother James (1801-1867), who, like his father, would be an elder at Lady Glenorchy's Chapel and would be deeply involved in numerous Evangelical and philanthropic enterprises. There are no known details, however, of Horatius's conversion, though his brother Andrew mentions in his diary that Horatius first took the Lord's Supper on January 3, 1830.

### 2. Education.

- a. "He was educated at Edinburgh High School and Edinburgh University before entering the Divinity Hall, where the Professor of Divinity was Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847), whom the Scottish literary figure Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) pronounced to be "the Chief Scottish man of his time." Chalmers had an enormous influence upon the young Bonar. As another of Chalmers's students later said of him, 'We never met with an individual who had the power Dr. Chalmers possessed of lifting the mind above earthly views.'
- (i) "Chalmers is chiefly remembered for his key role in the events that led to the formation of the Free Church of Scotland in 1843. But his influence should by no means be limited to those events. For instance, it was from among Chalmers's students that the first generation of Church of Scotland missionaries to India came, of whom the most notable is Alexander Duff (1806-1878). Chalmers was also convinced that all truth was God's truth and that the Christian faith should relate and be applied to every aspect of society.

- (ii) “His funeral in 1847 was a national event, drawing thousands of mourners from across every spectrum of Scottish life. If Horatius Bonar and his fellow students loved the gospel before they entered seminary, it is certain that that love was greatly increased by sitting at the feet of Chalmers. Their subsequent ministry was deeply and lastingly enriched by having sat under Chalmers’s teaching. Horatius Bonar considered Chalmers the greatest Christian he had ever known.
- b. “Another important influence on the young Bonar, as well as on his younger brother Andrew, were some lectures on the Book of Revelation that were given in Edinburgh over the years 1828 to 1830 by Edward Irving (1792-1834).
- (i) “At the time, Irving was one of the most popular Presbyterian preachers. In 1833, though, he would be removed from the ministry of the Church of Scotland for espousing the view that Christ’s humanity was so one with that of all human beings that He possessed sinful inclinations. In Irving’s estimation, only Christ’s being indwelt by the Holy Spirit prevented Him from actually sinning.
- (ii) Horatius Bonar, though, would have agreed with his friend Robert Murray McCheyne (1813-1843) when the latter described Irving as ‘a holy man in spite of all his delusions and errors.’
- (iii) Andrew Bonar later recalled the influence that Irving’s premillennial convictions had on him and his brother and a few other students: ‘May I tell you the history of some of us in Edinburgh? It is about sixty years since I myself felt the first thrill of interest in this subject-when Edward Irving was preaching in this city. He had lectures at seven in the morning during the time of the General Assembly, and for two or three years in succession, on prophetic subjects. We used to go at six in the morning to get a good seat. But I remember what led me to decision was the calm reading of Matthew 24. That chapter decided me on this subject. I could not see a foot- breadth of room for the Millennium before Christ comes in the clouds. It is wave upon wave of tribulation till the Son of Man appears.’
- (iv) The long-lasting influence of Irving’s lectures on Horatius in particular can be seen, for instance, in *The Quarterly Journal of Prophecy*, a publication that he edited from 1849 to 1873 and that was designed to promote premillennial eschatology. More than a few of his hymns also sought to press home this prophetic perspective. A good example is ‘I know not in what watch He comes,’ written in mid-March, 1880. The first stanza and final two run thus:

I know not in what watch He comes,  
 Or at what hour He may appear,  
 Whether at midnight or at morn,  
 Or in what season of the year;  
 I only know that He is near.

... The centuries have gone and come,  
 Dark centuries of absence drear;  
 I dare not chide the long delay,  
 Nor ask when I His voice shall hear;

I only know that He is near.

I do not think it can be long  
Till in His glory He appear;  
And yet I dare not name the day,  
Nor fix the solemn Advent year;  
I only know that He is near.

- c. “A third important influence with regard to Horatius Bonar’s spiritual growth during his days at the Divinity Hall came from a circle of friends that included two of his brothers – John James and Andrew; Robert McCheyne; Alexander Neil Somerville (1813-1889), later minister of Anderston Church, Glasgow, and a full-time evangelist from 1877 onwards; John Milne (1807-1868), later the minister of St. Leonard’s in Perth and whose biography Horatius Bonar wrote after Milne’s death; and a number of other young men. Iain Murray notes that Horatius appears to have been the leader among this group of students.
- (i) “Something of the way in which this group of friends served as spiritual mentors to one another can be seen in the following two extracts from Andrew Bonar’s diary, both from the year 1835:
    - (ii) “*Saturday, [May] 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 oaktree, one of the Psalms.
    - (iii) “*Friday, [August] 7th.* - *This* morning had an interesting and very useful conversation with John Purves ... regarding the importance of looking for all comfort and joy entirely and alone to Christ’s work, and not to ourselves or our frames.
2. Bonar’s ministry at St. John’s, Leith (1833-1837). (Leeth)
- a. “After being licensed to preach in 1833, Horatius Bonar’s first ministerial appointment was at Leith, the port of Edinburgh, where he worked as an assistant minister to James Lewis in the parish of St. John’s. Bonar had the responsibility of running the Sunday school, in which younger brother Andrew also served for a while as a teacher, and doing mission work in a very rough area of Leith. The latter especially involved house-to-house visitation in the medieval core of the port, which still consists of a maze of narrow streets and lanes. Simply from a physical standpoint, it was arduous work in that he had to ascend hundreds of stone staircases to knock on the doors of the various homes.
  - b. “Lewis secured a hall in which Bonar could also give public addresses twice on a Sunday to about 200 people and in which the Sunday school could operate in the evening. At the first meeting in the hall, the congregation was startled at one point by the entrance of one whom Bonar described as ‘a furious woman’ who came into the hall yelling, ‘My curse and the curse of God be upon you.’ But as Bonar noted, ‘the curse did not come,’ and instead there was rich blessing.
3. Bonar’s ministry at North Parish Church, Kelso (1837-1866).

- a. “Word of Bonar’s effective preaching came to the ears of a newly established congregation in Kelso, the North Parish Church, which sent a deputation to hear Bonar preach and sound him out regarding a call to their church. Unanimously called to this work on November 30, 1837, Bonar would labour in the Scottish Borders for twenty-nine years. On a ministerial level, it was at Kelso that Bonar’s gifts as an evangelist blossomed. The keynote that he sounded right from the start of his Kelso ministry was ‘Ye must be born again’ (John 3:7). Bonar was rightly convinced that without this emphasis from the pulpit on the vital need for personal regeneration, ‘all religion is hollow and superficial.’
- b. “The work eventually grew to the point that two assistant ministers had to be taken on to help in the evangelistic work not only in and around Kelso, but also throughout the counties of Roxburgh and Berwick, as well as in the neighboring county of Northumberland in England.
- c. “The work was not without opposition, though. As Bonar wrote: ‘Many rebuffs we got, many angry letters, many threats of ecclesiastical censure, much experience of what would now be called “boycotting”; but in spite of all this the work went on, good was returned for evil, and the evangelists found themselves and their message becoming more and more acceptable.’
- d. “One of Bonar’s successors at Kelso was W. Robertson Nicoll (1851-1923), who was minister there from 1877 to 1885 and who later became a well-known author and journalist. Nicoll noted that Bonar’s ministry at Kelso was one of ‘quenchless zeal and unrelenting labour. He set himself to evangelise the Borderland. His name was fragrant in every little village, and at most of the farms. He conducted many meetings in farm kitchens and village schoolrooms, and often preached in the open air. The memory of some sermons lingered.... The chief characteristic of his preaching was its strange solemnity. It was full of entreaty and of warning. Dr. Bonar exhibited with faithful simplicity and decision the great things of the Gospel, but he was never content without applying them to the consciences of his hearers. In his discourses his poet soul often had its way, and I have heard some of them described as almost lyrical. But he seemed to fear decoration and adornment, and the main characteristic of his style was its austere simplicity.’

#### 4. Writing and revival.

- a. “Bonar was also convinced of the importance of Christian literature as a vital means of evangelism and Christian nurture. To that end, he began writing while at Kelso a series of tracts and small booklets that could be printed cheaply and widely distributed.
- b. “From the titles of those written by Bonar – for example, *Believe and Live*, *The Well of Living Water*, *Luther’s Conversion*, *The Lord’s Supper*, *Do you go to the Prayer-Meeting?*- it can be seen that they cover a variety of subjects, but a central theme is evangelism.
- c. “Other authors, including his brother Andrew, were also involved and the series became known as the *Kelso Tracts*. A snippet of the publishing history of one of these tracts alone, *Believe and Live*, can help one gauge something of the extraordinary impact of these booklets. It was first printed in 1839. Seventy years later it was estimated that a million copies of it had been put into circulation!

- d. “These tracts opened the way for other literary endeavors. In 1844 his first book, *The School of the Prophets; or, Training for the Ministry-later* issued under the title *Words to Winners of Souls-appeared*. It was followed by a flow of books, sermon collections, and biographies from the ‘ceaseless activity of his pen’ - as his friend Alexander Somerville put it.
- e. “In addition, he was also involved in the editing of a number of periodicals, including *The Quarterly Journal of Prophecy* mentioned above, and the widely read *Christian Treasury*. His hymns, the literary endeavour for which he is probably most remembered today, are discussed below.
- f. “A recent statement in the introduction to a reprint of one of his books well sums up the significance of this literary ministry. Bonar was ‘clearly one of the most valued evangelical writers of the nineteenth century and he has to be bracketed with J. C. Ryle and C.H. Spurgeon in his understanding of the power of the press and in putting it to extensive use.’
- g. “This writing ministry came at a time when Scotland was hungry for the Word of God and its exposition. In the late 1830s and the early 1840s, Scotland knew genuine revival.
  - (i) “Beginning at Kilsyth in late July 1839, it soon spread to other areas of the Lowlands – Dundee and Perth were especially affected – and from there to the rest of Scotland.
  - (ii) “In Dundee, the revival was centered on St. Peter’s, the ministerial charge of Robert McCheyne, though McCheyne himself was away on a mission trip to Palestine with Andrew Bonar when the revival began.
  - (iii) “Throughout much of August and the early months of autumn that year, crowded meetings were held every day, with considerable numbers in distress about the state of their souls and subsequently professing salvation. St. Leonard’s in Perth, where Horatius Bonar’s friend John Milne was the minister, saw similar scenes of spiritual blessing. Throughout the early months of 1840, two services were held there every day, with the evening ones lasting up to four hours.
  - (iv) “Although Horatius Bonar in Kelso was not at the epicenter of this spiritual awakening, he and his congregation were not untouched in this time of remarkable blessing. As he summed up this move of God: ‘During this season there were all the marks of a work of God which we see in the account given of the preaching of the gospel by the apostles. The multitude was divided, families were divided; the people of God were knit together, they were filled with zeal and joy and heavenly-mindedness; they continued steadfast, and increased in doctrine and fellowships, being daily in church and in prayer meetings, and numbers were constantly turning to the Lord.’

## 5. The Disruption of 1843.

- a. “In some ways this time of revival was preparation for the storm. For in 1843 there occurred what Stewart J. Brown calls ‘the most important event in the history of nineteenth -century Scotland,’ namely, the Disruption, which cut the Church of Scotland in two. On the day when the split actually took place, May 18, Andrew Bonar wrote in his *Diary* that it was ‘a day which will be memorable in the world till the Lord come.’ A week later he called it an event of ‘deep solemnity’!

- b. “Two issues were central to this momentous event. First, whether or not ministers could be imposed on congregations at the wish of patrons even when such settlements were contrary to the will of the congregations. Second, in connection with their objections to patronage, Evangelicals wished to revitalize the idea of a man being called to the ministry. Those who wished to uphold the practice of parish patronage appealed to the civil courts, while Thomas Chalmers led those who, wishing to honor the sovereignty of Christ over the affairs of His church, maintained that the civil courts had no jurisdiction in the spiritual realm.
  - c. “Horatius Bonar gave voice to the view of the latter group when he stated in November 1842 that: ‘The whole contest ... has been concerning the laws of Christ, more especially those pertaining to the choosing of Ministers and the government of his Church. We have held that Christ’s people ought to have the calling of their Ministers, and that it is through them (*i.e.* through his people) that he expresses his mind, so as to point out the fitting Pastor, and not through the Presbytery or the Patron. Again, we have held, that Christ’s ordained office-bearers are the only rulers of his Church and administrators of his laws, with whose discipline, government, ordination, deposition, excommunication, no civil lawgiver or judge may interfere. The questions, then, on which the controversy has hinged, have been such as these. Is Christ our lawgiver? Is he our *only* lawgiver? Has he really given us laws? Are we bound to act upon these laws?... When Christ’s laws and man’s laws are opposed to each other, which are we to obey?’
  - d. Rather than abandon the church’s independence from the state, Chalmers and those like-minded, including all three of the Bonar brothers who were ministers along with their respective congregations, decided to give up the privileges of establishment. In many cases, those who left the national church gave up ‘salary and security. Manses had to be vacated, new places of worship ... found, incredible hardships...endured.’
  - e. “All told, slightly more than 450 ministers out of an estimated 1,195 ministers separated from the Church of Scotland in May 1843 to form the Church of Scotland Free (better known as the Free Church of Scotland). Somewhere between forty and fifty percent of the membership of the Established Church went with the Free Church. In parishes where the minister ‘went out,’ he was generally accompanied by most of his congregation. In the Highlands, practically the entire church-going population forsook the Church of Scotland.
  - f. “It should be noted that the Scottish Disruption had contemporaneous parallels on the continent of Europe. Seen in this perspective, it appears to be part of a general struggle in a number of areas of Europe to retain Evangelical Christianity.
6. Bonar’s ministry at Chalmers Memorial Church, Edinburgh (1866-1889).
- a. “Horatius Bonar’s final sphere of ministry was in Edinburgh. He had received several calls to other spheres of ministry during his time at Kelso, but he never seriously considered leaving until called in June 1866 to become the first minister of the newly established Chalmers Memorial Church (later renamed St. Catherine’s Argyle Church). He would be there until his death on July 31, 1889.
  - b. “His preaching – he preached up until a year or so before his death – and writing continued to maintain the utter centrality of the cross in the Christian life and to exalt the absolute sufficiency of Christ for the sinner.

- c. “In 1888, when he celebrated his jubilee as a minister, he referred to ‘twenty-two chequered years’ of ministry in Edinburgh – evidently a reference to the fact that his ministry, like any faithful ministry, had involved blessings and problems, triumphs and setbacks. But he hastened to add that amid all of the ups and downs of his time at Edinburgh, one thing had been constant. ‘God has been gracious, and has not disowned the work and the message. Righteousness without works to the sinner, simply on his acceptance of the divine message concerning Jesus and His sufficiency, this has been the burden of our good news. “Through this Man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins, and by Him all that believe are justified from all things” [Acts 13:38-39]. It is one message, one gospel, one cross, one sacrifice, from which nothing can be taken, and to which nothing can be added. This is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the ending of our ministry. Sad and useless must be the ministry of anyone to whom this gospel in its simplicity is not all in all.’
- d. “This emphasis on the ongoing validity and stability of the apostolic gospel was a much-needed one in the last forty years of the nineteenth century when many in Britain were calling for making ‘progress’ in theology and were actively discarding older perspectives. Bonar would have none of it. As he wrote at the outset of the preface to his 1866 edition of the *Catechisms of the Scottish Reformation*: ‘It is not from the mere love of what is old or national, that I have been led to re-edit these rudimental standards of the Church of Scotland. I wish certainly to preserve them; but not as mere fossils for a museum; not as the footprints of an extinct race; not as relics of an exploded theology, or an obsolete religion. I would reprint them because of their genuine and unaltered value, and as embodying truths which are quite as necessary for us as they were for our fathers. The truths of the Reformation are not obsolete .... They are not old anchorage-ground, which the elevation of the coast during these three centuries has left dry. Nor are these catechisms old anchors from which the cables have been slipped, and which have been left to rust on the beach or sink into the sands; superseded by modern inventions better fitted to abide the storm. The doctrines themselves are not ephemeral, nor have the formulae in which our fathers clothed them been proved to be either inaccurate or inadequate. In so far as they do not fit in with “the spirit of the age,” there is room for fair inquiry as to whether the fault may not belong to the age rather than to the *dogmata* or their *formulae*.’
- e. Later on in this preface, he returns to the dangers facing those who would trade fidelity to past truth for present relevancy. It is a part of a long footnote, but it deserves to be quoted at length, in particular because of its relevance for our own day:
- (i) ‘Some well-meaning theological literateurs, or rather amateur theologians, who patronize religion in their own way, are fain to warn us of the danger of not “keeping abreast of the age,” as if we were imperiling Christianity by not being quite so learned in modern speculations as they are. We should like, certainly, to “keep abreast” of all that is true and good, either in this age or any other; but as to doing more than that, or singling out this age as being pre-eminently worthy of being kept abreast of, we hesitate. To be “up to” all the errors, fallacies, speculations, fancies, miscriticisms of the age, would be an achievement of no



mean kind; and to require us to be “up to” all this under threat of endangering Christianity, or betraying the Bible, is an exaction which could only be made by men who think that religion is much beholden to them for their condescending patronage; and will only be accepted by men who are timid about the stability of the cross of Christ if left unpropped by human wisdom; and who, besides, happen to have three or four lifetimes to spare. We may be in a condition for believing, and even for defending the Bible, without having mastered the whole deistical literature of the last century, or the present. We may be qualified to accept the doctrine of sacrificial substitution even though we are not “up to” all that has been spoken against it from Cain to Colenso....

(ii) ‘In attempting to “keep abreast of the age,” there is some danger of falling short of other ages; and we are not sure but that the object of those who shake this phrase so complacently in our faces, both as a taunt and a threat, is to draw us off from the past altogether, as if the greater bulk of its literature were rude lumber, a mere drag upon progress .... Old theological terms and Scripture phraseology are set aside, or spoken in an undertone, or used in a loose ... sense. Sharp adhesion to old doctrines is imbecility; and yet defined expression of the new is avoided, the mind of the age being in a transition state, unable to bear the whole of what the exact and honest exhibition of “advanced” Christianity would require to utter. Many of our young men are more afraid of being reckoned Calvinistic than Platonic; they shrink from bold and definite statements of Reformation doctrine, lest they should be pronounced “not abreast of the age” – stereotyped, if not imbecile. Indefinite language, mystical utterances, negative or defective statements, which will save the speaker’s or writer’s orthodoxy without compromising his reputation for “intellect” and “liberality” these are becoming common. Many are doing their best to serve two masters, to preach two gospels, to subscribe two confessions of faith, to worship two Gods, to combine two religions, to grasp two worlds; they would fain be neither very evangelical nor very heretical.’

f. ‘The perspective informing Bonar’s thought in this passage is that doctrinal error is ultimately a moral and spiritual issue. As he states in *God’s Way of Holiness* (1864): ‘error injures, truth heals; error is the root of sin, truth that of purity and perfection.’

#### 7. Bonar’s hymns.

- a. “In the preface from which the above quotations are taken, Bonar also refutes those who would seek to oppose ‘life’ and ‘doctrine’ and argue that Christianity is primarily ‘a life, not a dogma.’ Rejection of such a viewpoint can be found explicitly throughout Bonar’s written works. It is also implicit in that body of literature for which he is most remembered today, namely, his hymns.
- b. “Bonar had begun writing hymns in Leith for the children who attended the Sabbath school that he supervised. There were over 280 of them present on any given Sunday – in one of his notebooks he noted the names of all the boys and girls in the Sunday school. What struck him as he first watched them in 1833 during their times of worship was how fidgety many of them were. He soon came up with the idea of providing them with hymns of their own, set to tunes the children knew well and

liked to sing. The experiment, as it were, worked, and he noticed a marked improvement in their paying attention during the times of worship in the Sabbath school.

- c. “Just as the writing of small tracts had led to bigger literary projects, so the children’s hymns eventually led, in 1836, to his writing hymns that were for the use of older worshippers. The first of these was the well-known hymn, ‘Go, labour on; spend, and be spent.’ It breathes the evangelistic passion that characterized Bonar’s ministry all of his life and it ends, not surprisingly, on an eschatological note:

‘Go, labour on; spend, and be spent,  
Thy joy to do the Father’s will:  
It is the way the Master went,  
Should not the servant tread it still?

Go, labour on while it is day;  
The world’s dark night is hastening on;  
Speed, speed thy work, cast sloth away;  
It is not thus that souls are won.

Toil on, faint not, keep watch and pray;  
Be wise the erring soul to win;  
Go forth into the world’s highway,  
Compel the wanderer to come in.

Toil on, and in thy toil rejoice!  
For toil comes rest, for exile home;  
Soon shalt thou hear the Bridegroom’s voice,  
The midnight peal, ‘Behold, I come!’

- d. “He went on to publish over 600 hymns and poems during the course of his life, a number of which have rightly led to his being regarded as the finest Scottish hymn-writer of the nineteenth century. Among this number are such hymns as ‘I heard the voice of Jesus say’ - originally entitled by Bonar as ‘The Voice from Galilee’ – his communion hymn, ‘Here O my Lord, I see Thee face to face,’ and ‘Not what these hands have done,’ a rich meditation on the central emphases of Reformed thought.
8. *Christ is All*: the heart of Bonar’s piety.
- a. “Bonar’s devotional writings are the other literary works for which he is remembered today. Typical of these is one that was written towards the end of his ministry at Kelso, has a succinct, single-minded focus on Christ, and provides an excellent vantage-point for viewing the heart of Bonar’s piety. Written in 1861, it is a preface he wrote to a minor seventeenth-century Puritan classic that has been known by a variety of titles: *Christ is All* (the title used by Bonar in his edition of the work), *A Guide to Eternal Glory* (the title under which it originally appeared in 1685), and *A Choice Drop of Honey from the Rock Christ*. The author of the work was Thomas Wilcox (1622-1687), a Calvinistic Baptist minister who pastored a London

congregation during the difficult days of the reigns of Charles II (r. 1660-1685) and James II (r. 1685-1688) and who was imprisoned a number of times for refusing to conform to the Church of England.

- b. “Bonar had a deep love for that stream of Reformed literature that came down from the Reformation of the sixteenth century through the Puritans to the Evangelicals of the eighteenth century, and he wrote prefaces for a number of editions of works from this Reformed tradition. His preface to Wilcox’s work may be divided into four sections. In the first section, Bonar argues that the Lord Jesus Christ is ‘the gift of Godhead to us. It is the threefold love of the three-one Jehovah that we find in this gift.’ In the first place, Christ came into our world because He was sent by the Father, and thus He can be thought of as ‘the Father’s Gift.’ Moreover, he came into this world freely and out of love for poor sinners. Thus, Bonar argues, ‘Christ is His own gift to sinners. He gives himself to us, as well as for us .... He gives himself to us – not certain blessings merely, but himself. To the sick, and weary, and poor, and dark, and sorrowful, He presents himself as the one gift – the reception of which, by us, would deliver us from sin, and want, and grief.’
- c. “Bonar proceeds to note that there is also a very real sense in which the Holy Spirit is also the Giver of the gift that is the Lord Jesus. When preachers urge sinners to embrace the salvation in Christ, they do so in the strength of the Spirit. ‘It is by the voice of the Spirit,’ he writes, ‘that this gift is proclaimed to us,’ so that ‘Christ is the gift of the Spirit’s love as truly as He is the gift of the Father’s love.’
- d. “Bonar further notes in this regard that the gift of Christ is not simply an expression of the ‘threefold love’ of the Godhead for sinners. It is a gift that reveals ‘the infinite evil of sin.’ The sinners for whom the gift is given are utterly guilty according to the law of God. The only way their guilt can be removed is for One to pay the penalty of their sin, and ‘nothing short of the death of Christ can accomplish this end.’ Bonar thus emphasizes that the central fact in the biblical perspective about the gift that is Christ is not His incarnation but His death for sinners. ‘If mere incarnation could have done the work, would love have gone further, and demanded something more expensive and terrible? If all that were needed was, that the Word should “take flesh,” would the bitterness of death have been added? It is in the “blood-shedding” – the giving of life for life – that the real character of the gift is seen ....’
- e. “In the second section of the preface, Bonar lists eight crucial things that God says in His Word about the gift that is Christ.
  - (i) “First, Christ is described by Scripture as the life of His people. As John 1:4 puts it, ‘In him was life.’ Bonar stresses that all of the believer’s spiritual life from its very beginning when Christ first comes into the life of one dead in sin and quickens that sinner, to the believer’s ‘consummated perfection’ in glory comes from Christ. As he puts it in his hymn, ‘One Christ we feed upon, one living Christ’:

One Christ we feed upon, one living Christ,  
Who once was dead, but lives for ever now; ...

My life, my everlasting life art Thou,  
My health, my joy, my strength, I owe to Thee:

Because Thou livest, I shall also live,  
And where Thou art in glory, there I too shall be.

Thou *with* us, and Thou *in* us, – this is life ....

- (ii) “Second, as Paul maintains in 2 Corinthians 5:21, Christ has been made the believer’s righteousness. Christ’s righteousness, the complete fulfillment of the law that was wrought through His earthly life, is given to the believer. As Bonar put it elsewhere: ‘Jehovah is satisfied with Christ’s obedience. He is well pleased with His righteousness. And when we, crediting His testimony to that obedience and that righteousness, consent to be treated by Him on the footing of its perfection, then He is satisfied and well pleased with us .... [Such faith] knits us to the infinite worthiness of Him in whom the Father delights; and so knitting us, presents us perfect in the perfection of another.’ In one of his notes to Wilcox’s tract, Bonar quotes from the eighteenth-century Evangelical Anglican John Berridge (1716-1793): ‘A robe I must have of one whole piece, broad as the law, spotless as the light, and richer than an angel ever wore, the robe of Jesus.’
- (iii) “Third, Christ is the peace of His people. Through His death on the cross, He reconciles sinners and God, and He gives peace to the guilty conscience. In fact, not only does Christ give peace, but, in the words of Ephesians 2:14, ‘he is our peace.’ As Bonar explains: ‘The knowledge of self, troubles; but the knowledge of Christ pacifies and gladdens. The knowledge of sin terrifies, but the knowledge of Christ gives peace and drives away all fear.’
- (iv) “Fourth, according to such Johannine texts as John 1:4, 9, and 8:12, Christ has come into this world as the Light that drives away our darkness, reveals the Father and His love, and dispels the gloom from our lives. In the words of one of Bonar’s hymns,

He has come! the Christ of God:  
Left for us His glad abode,  
Stooping from His throne of bliss  
To this darksome wilderness.

He has come! the Prince of Peace;  
Come to bid our sorrows cease;  
Come to scatter with His light  
All the shadows of our night.

- (v) “Then, fifth, Christ is our wisdom, an assertion found in such passages as Colossians 2:3 and 1 Corinthians 1:30.
- (vi) “Sixth, since unbelievers are utterly paralyzed for doing what is good, Christ is appointed to be their strength after their conversion. Moreover, Bonar affirms, because this human need is met in Christ, ‘God does not fill us anew with strength in ourselves, – depositing it within us, that we may use it at pleasure. Our strength, like our life, is deposited in Christ. He is our strength, and it is only by

having continual recourse to Him that we are strong.’ Bonar put this vital truth this way in one of his more famous hymns:

I have no help but thine; nor do I need  
Another arm save thine to lean upon;  
It is enough, my Lord, enough indeed;  
My strength is in thy might, thy might alone.

- (vii) “Christ is also the believer’s consolation and comfort. Bonar is quite aware that the Scriptures, notably the Gospel of John, call the Holy Spirit ‘the Comforter.’ But, true to his Christ-centeredness, Bonar states that the comfort that the Spirit gives is drawn out of Christ. The Spirit comforts the people of God by opening up the unsearchable riches of Christ. ‘Christ is the well,’ Bonar goes on to say, ‘out of which He [i.e., the Holy Spirit] brings the drafts of abundant consolation, with which He refreshes and revives us in our weariness.’ In *God’s Way of Peace*, Bonar makes the same point in this way: ‘your medicine and your physician are not the same, yet they go together. Christ is your medicine, the Spirit is your physician.’
- (viii) “Finally, Bonar argues, Christ is the believer’s hope – hope for the future and hope of glory in heaven. As he stresses: ‘Our own doings are not our hope. Our feelings, our experiences, our evidences, our graces, are not our hope. They can neither kindle nor keep alive the heavenly flame. It is Christ that is our hope.’
- f. “In the third section of the preface, Bonar looks at various ways that the Scriptures talk about the relationship between Christ and His people. For example, Colossians 2:7 talks of Christians being ‘rooted and built up’ in Christ. Jude 1 says that believers are ‘preserved in Jesus Christ.’ These various descriptions of the connection between Christ and His people reinforce what Bonar seeks to show in the second section of the preface, namely, that ‘Christ is all’ for believers. Thus, Bonar can exhort sinners outside of Christ to recognize that ‘all that a sinner needs is to be found in Christ; for that which is in Him, is for sinners .... Out of Christ there is, and there can be nothing but what is evil. In Him there is everything that the soul stands in need of.’
- g. “In the fourth and final section of the preface, Bonar reviews the way in which this testimony about the all-sufficiency of Christ has been faithfully maintained in the history of the church since the days of the Reformation. He refers to men like Martin Luther (1483-1546), Thomas Boston (1677-1732), and William Romaine (1714-1795). And Bonar, having gone to his reward, can also be included among this line of faithful witnesses. A portion of one of his hymns that clearly glories in the fact that Christ is all for the true believer forms a fitting conclusion to this introduction:

Not what these hands have done  
Can save this guilty soul;  
Not what this toiling flesh has borne  
Can make my spirit whole.

Not what I feel or do  
Can give me peace with God;  
Not all my prayers, and sighs, and tears,  
Can bear my awful load.

Thy work alone, O Christ,  
Can ease this weight of sin;  
Thy blood alone, O Lamb of God,  
Can give me peace within.

Thy love to me, O God,  
Not mine, a Lord, to thee,  
Can rid me of this dark unrest,  
And set my spirit free.

Thy grace alone, O God,  
To me can pardon speak;  
Thy power alone, O Son of God,  
Can this sore bondage break.

No other work, save thine,  
No meaner blood will do;  
No strength, save that which is divine,  
Can bear me safely through.

I bless the Christ of God;  
I rest on love divine;  
And with unfaltering lip and heart,  
I call this Saviour mine.

His cross dispels each doubt;  
I bury in his tomb  
Each thought of unbelief and fear,  
Each lingering shade of gloom.

I praise the God of grace;  
I trust his truth and might;  
He calls me his, I call him mine,  
My God, my joy, my light.

In him is only good,  
In me is only ill;  
My ill but draws his goodness forth,  
And me he loveth still.

'Tis he who saveth me,

And freely pardon gives;  
I love because he loveth me,  
I live because he lives.

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