

Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush: Nineteenth-Century Scotland

You may wonder where I come up with some of these titles. This one was very easy because it comes from a very famous book that I read over and over again called *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush*. It is a book by Dr. John Watson whose pen name is Ian Maclaren. It is a collection of fictional accounts of church life in a glen, a place that Dr. Watson calls Drumtochty in Scotland. The story is set in the nineteenth century. It is about the churches and the people in that little glen in Scotland. Years ago, Dr. John Sanderson recommended this book to me, and I read it from time to time just to renew my joy in reading about Scotland. It was a time in Scotland when Presbyterian churches were very much a part of the culture.

The stories in *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush* might well be illustrated by John Lorimer's painting, which hangs in the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh. It is called "The Ordination of the Elders in a Scottish Kirk." It was painted in 1891. The bush in *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush* is the thistle, the Scottish symbol since the early sixteenth century. It became a symbol not only of the land of Scotland but also of the Presbyterian Church. The thistle is a pretty tough plant. Farmers find that out when they struggle with thistles. But it is a beautiful plant, too, that is able to survive and often flourish in very difficult places. So, it is not an inappropriate symbol for the Presbyterian Church. Because it is a Presbyterian symbol, it has also become a Covenant Seminary symbol. We have had the thistle in our seal of the seminary along with clergy tartan and numerous other Scottish devices because of the close connection between the history of the church in Scotland and the seminary, which comes somewhat from Scottish heritage. As we begin this lecture on nineteenth-century Scotland, I want to use a prayer from Horatius Bonar, a great Scottish pastor, theologian, and hymn writer. Let us pray.

"Fill Thou my life, O Lord, my God, in every part, with praise that my whole being may proclaim Thy being and Thy ways, praise in the common things of life, its goings out and in, praise in each duty and each deed however small and mean. Fill every part of me with praise. Let all my being speak of Thee and of Thy love, O Lord, poor though I be and weak so that no part of day or night from sacredness be free, but all my life and every step be fellowship with Thee. Amen."

Episcopacy was reimposed in Scotland in 1660 with the restoration of the Stuarts. That brought, of course, great suffering to Presbyterian people who opposed the settlement of prelacy or the Episcopal Church on the land of Scotland. That suffering came to an end in 1688 and 1689 with the glorious revolution of William and Mary, which brought an end to the Stuart reign and introduced a new day into the lives of people in England and Scotland. The settlement of 1690 restored Presbyterianism to become once again the faith of the Scottish people. This was 130 years after the first settlement of Presbyterianism in 1560 during the days of John Knox. From 1560 to 1690 was, as we know now, a tumultuous period in Scottish history and especially in Scottish Presbyterian history. At the settlement of 1690, the Anglican Church was established in England, and the Presbyterian Church was established in Scotland. From that point down to the present, the Anglican Church is the Church of England even though non-conformists were tolerated in England. The Presbyterian Church is the Church of Scotland.

Since 1603, Scotland and England had been under one ruler. The union of the Parliaments would not take place until 1707. Now, 300 years later, Scotland is to have its own Parliament once again as the new labor government is working for the establishment of a Scottish Parliament. In the period of the settlement of 1690, there was one ruler but two state religions, depending on what part of the British Isles you were in. Actually, north of the border the king or queen would become Presbyterian simply by

crossing over the line. It did not matter that he or she was the supreme governor of the Church of England. The king and the queen then worshiped in the Kirk in Scotland.

There is a story about Queen Victoria. On one occasion when she was in the North at the castle at Balmoral, she went as she did ordinarily to Crathie Kirk in the town of Crathie near the castle. There, she took the Lord's Supper. In those days, the clerk in the church would list the people who received communion on a given Sunday not by name but by profession. So, on this day, when the queen was there and received the Lord's Supper, the clerk wrote in his book, "Shepherds: 12, Servants: 12, Queens: 1."

Well, that illustrates something of the unusual nature of the settlement of Anglicanism in the South and Presbyterianism in the North. When the Presbyterian Church was reestablished as the Church of Scotland in 1690, there were two groups that remained outside of that settlement. One was the Scottish Episcopalians. There were people who were Episcopalian, particularly during the preceding years of the Stuart reign. Many of those Episcopalians now switched over to Presbyterianism, but some did not. Some remained Episcopalian. The Scottish Episcopal Church was legally recognized in 1712. However, that church was not popular in Scotland, as you can imagine, and became even less popular because the Episcopalians and the few Roman Catholics who were still around supported the Jacobite Cause to restore the Stuarts to the throne. The Scottish Episcopalians experienced repression and persecution because of this.

The other group that stayed out of the settlement was the Presbyterian group. A small number of Presbyterians, called the Covenanters, felt that the settlement of William and Mary was defective. It was not Presbyterian enough. It did not acknowledge the covenants. The covenants were discreetly dropped. So, these Presbyterians, the Covenanters, objected to the settlement and did not become part of the state church. They met for a while in groups called societies until they were finally able to constitute themselves into a denomination, which is called the Reformed Presbyterian Church. This happened in 1743. The Reformed Presbyterian Church exists all the way down to the present in very tiny groups in Scotland and Ireland. There is a larger group in the United States called the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America. Those people still go by the name of "The Covenanters." Most Scottish people became members of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, the state church. I would like to look through the history of that state church and touch on some highlights, important names, and important events that mark the history of the Church of Scotland during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

One of the wonderful ministers of that church was a professor of divinity at Saint Andrews University. His name was Thomas Haliburton. I included him in this brief survey because I want to encourage you to read Haliburton sometime. You get a wonderful, warm, evangelical, Reformed faith that comes through in Haliburton's writings. His sermons are also heart-searching and intensely practical. In my mind, he is one of the great figures of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in the history of the Church of Scotland. Unfortunately, Haliburton does not represent what happened to the church. It would be wonderful if he were an example of a lot of people and the attitude in the Church of Scotland. However, a dead, Reformed orthodoxy began to settle in over this church, which had fought so long for its spiritual independence and had such a glorious and wonderful history. Churches can lose their traditions quickly, and the Church of Scotland did. Before long, there were people who were accurate and Orthodox but very hard and cold in their faith. Alexander White, the Free Church minister of Scotland, talked about sanctification by vinegar. He said that some people are sanctified by vinegar: they are accurate and Orthodox but not very sweet or winsome in their spiritual lives and in their ministries.

Something like that was taking place in the Church of Scotland at this time. Some of the ministers were closed to the message of free grace despite their Orthodoxy. They were also closed to the lost in all nations as they resisted the missionary movement as much as the English Baptists resisted the urgent plea of William Carey for the church to become active in the evangelization of the lost throughout the world. It was not long before we have what is called the Marrow Controversy in the Scottish Church.

There was a presbytery in Scotland called the Auchterarder presbytery that began to ask candidates who were coming before the presbytery for licensure and ordination this question: “Do you subscribe to the following: I believe that it is not sound and orthodox to teach that we must forsake sin in order to come to Christ.” This was the only presbytery that asked this question, but the candidates coming to the Auchterarder presbytery had to answer it. I wonder how you would have answered that question if you were facing the fathers and brothers of the Auchterarder presbytery. One man stammered and stuttered and could not bring himself to subscribe to that statement, and he was denied licensure by the presbytery. The General Assembly then had to act to condemn this statement as a statement that was false and unsound. Now, the statement is a rather complex one, and I do not blame people for being confused when they look at it and try to decide whether it is right or wrong. Despite the awkwardness of the language, the brothers of the Auchterarder presbytery were attempting to preserve the free grace of the Gospel—that people do not have to clean up their lives, qualify for it, or do anything but come to Christ. In coming to Christ, Christ brings His own benefits, including faith and repentance. So, the heart of the presbytery was in the right place, but the Church of Scotland rejected that message of free grace.

The struggle continued under the leadership of a famous man named Thomas Boston. He was one of the great ministers in the history of the church. He was a minister at Ettrick near the English border and what is known as the Scottish borders. Thomas Boston was a pastor, and he fought against the mood of the General Assembly, which in subtle ways was introducing some kind of human preparation, righteousness, or qualification for the receiving of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Boston’s most famous work is *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*. For 100 years, Boston’s *Fourfold State* was a book that was read in Scotland next to the Bible. It became tremendously influential in Scottish history. Then it made its way over to the United States, where Jonathan Edwards read it with great appreciation, and many others read it as well. Thomas Boston had a small group of people called “The Marrow Men.” They had that unusual name because they read, recommended, printed, and did everything they could to set forth throughout Scotland the message of an old book they had discovered. This book was called *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* and had been written almost 100 years earlier. The Marrow Men stood for the free message of the Gospel in a day when the understanding of pure and complete grace—efficacious grace—as a wonderful gift of God without works lest anyone should boast was being obscured and lost in Scottish history.

I am rather pleased to know that one of those Marrow Men was John Calhoun, who was a minister and wrote a number of books defending Thomas Boston and the Marrow. There were two great issues at stake here. One issue was whether anything was required before we come to Christ or if coming to Christ was the only thing we need to do. The Marrow said, “Nothing is required but coming to Christ, but that begins a life of activity—faith, repentance, and service of the Lord. Nothing is required but simply coming.”

The other great issue was whether we can tell lost people that. Can we go out and preach the Gospel to everybody, or do we have to worry about who are the elect and how we should shape and frame this message so we do not preach it to the wrong people. Well, the Marrow Men said, “Preach it to everybody,” preach the Gospel to everyone. This is what the Bible requires us to do, and that is what we should do. We should tell everyone that if a person—whoever that person is—believes on the Lord Jesus

Christ and comes to Christ, that person will find eternal life. It is clear, by this time, that the Moderates were in control of the Church of Scotland, because The Marrow was condemned, and the Marrow Men were despised as troublemakers in the church.

The Moderate ascendancy in the Church of Scotland is described by the famous Scottish novelist, Robert Lewis Stephenson, and celebrated by the great Scottish poet, Robert Burns. It is really sad to think of the life of Robert Burns, particularly for a Scott, because so much of what Robert Burns wrote is beautiful and of real value in describing human emotions, scenery, and much of what makes up life in Scotland. Robert Burns was not a very religious man, nor was he an evangelical Presbyterian. He became a tool and a victim of the Moderate ministers in the parish of Ayrshire where he lived. Burns once wrote these words to a friend, which tell us where he stood theologically: "My creed is pretty nearly expressed by the words 'Lord, grant that we may lead a good life, for a good life makes a good end—at least it helps.'" So, you do get a lot of serious thought about theological issues from Robert Burns. He tends to make fun of the strict Presbyterians, and he tends to celebrate the triumph of the Moderates. There is another man in Scotland, John Witherspoon, who is famous in this country, too, because he became one of the early presidents of Princeton College in New Jersey. He was an American patriot. Witherspoon criticized the Moderates. He grew up in Scotland during the reign of the Moderates. He said, "Moderate preaching is like a winter's day. It is brief, dark, and cold."

There were two great problems in the church by this time. It was not so much theological Orthodoxy because people still claimed to believe the Westminster Confession. So, the church had not yet fallen to liberalism. However, the two problems were dead Orthodoxy (which we already talked about) and patronage. Patronage is a Scottish practice in which landowners were able to have the final say concerning the settlement of a minister. In the Presbyterian system, the church calls the minister and the presbytery approves that call. In Scotland, there was another level. Many of these churches were built on land that the lords owned. Sometimes they owned the church building, and everybody in that area was a servant of that particular laird. So, patronage meant that the laird had the final say. If he did not like the minister that the church had called, the church could not call that minister. Well that, of course, undercuts Presbyterianism at a very vital place. The congregation then thwarted in its decision to call a minister of the Gospel. The problem of patronage (along with the problem of dead orthodoxy) led to two secessions from the Church of Scotland that were not too far apart.

Now we come to the people who called themselves the "seceders." The first secession took place in 1733. It was led by a man named Ebenezer Erskine. He was very much a part of the Marrow Movement. Erskine and his friends left the Church of Scotland because of doctrinal Orthodoxy being held in a cold and formal way and because of the problem of patronage. Erskine said, "What difference does a piece of land make between man and man in the affairs of Christ's kingdom? Why should the lord have any more say in who comes to the church than the servant in the church?" So, this small group of people left the church and became what is known as the Associate Presbytery. The Associate Reformed Presbyterian (ARP) Church today maintains that word, which is an honored word in ARP history. Then there were three Presbyterian churches in Scotland: the Covenanters, the Church of Scotland, and the Associate Presbytery. Problems remained in the Church of Scotland despite some revival that came in 1742 through the preaching of George Whitefield. The famous Cambuslang Revival that I have talked about already came to the Church of Scotland and not the small seceding group that wanted to hold Whitefield for itself. Whitefield said, "I will preach everywhere. If the pope of Rome would give me his pulpit, I would preach there." So, revival came not to the seceders but to the Church of Scotland. Despite the revival, there were still problems, and soon another church developed. You may wonder why this church did not join the first Seceder Church, but neither Presbyterians nor Scots do it that easily. So, another church, led by Thomas Gillespie, seceded over the same issues. It created the Relief Presbytery in 1761.

Let us take a quick look at other denominations in Scotland before we go back to the Church of Scotland. I have already mentioned the Scottish Episcopal Church, which was organized in 1766 and then began to grow and even flourish. Scottish Episcopalians are “High Church,” but not anything like the Broad Church or Low Church of England. In contrast, the “High Church” is very much in contrast to the Presbyterianism of Scotland. Then Congregationalists and Baptists came into the Scottish picture by the end of the eighteenth century. James and Robert Haldane were wealthy brothers who began to preach. They were laymen, not ministers, but they felt like God was calling them to preach. They wanted to be missionaries but were hindered in that. So, they set out on preaching missions, particularly in the highlands and islands of Scotland, where many people still had not heard the true Gospel even all these years after the Reformation. The Church of Scotland opposed the Haldane mission and viewed these two brothers as unqualified preachers. After all, they had not gone to seminary and been licensed or ordained properly. They were just preaching. The Church of Scotland did not like that and tried to restrict the ministry of the Haldanes. These men, who remained evangelical Calvinists, then became Baptists. Through their work, both the Congregational and Baptist churches began to appear in Scotland—not in large numbers. There are Congregationalists and Baptists today who trace their history back to the ministry of James and Robert Haldane. We will think about the Haldanes again later because Robert Haldane showed up in Geneva, Switzerland, and had a great deal to do with the second Swiss Reformation that took place in the nineteenth century.

I would also like to mention the growth of the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland. After the Reformation, Catholics were scattered and few in number. There were some islands in the Hebrides that remain Catholic, and there are some pockets of Catholics up in the Highlands. However, there were not many Catholics until the nineteenth century when there was a great immigration of Irish people to Glasgow. These people were Catholics, and so the Catholic Church began to grow greatly in Glasgow and in the cities of Scotland. The Roman Catholic Church is today, perhaps, the strongest church in the land of John Knox.

Let us get back to the Church of Scotland with its renewal and division. There was still some spiritual life in the old state church despite all of the problems I have talked about and the secessions that took place. Alexander Duff became the church’s first missionary. He went to India in 1829. It was then that missions began to be a part of the life of the Scottish church. Robert Murray McShane was a minister in the Church of Scotland who emphasized missions abroad and godliness at home. In his short life as minister of Saint Peter’s in the town of Dundee, McShane (who died when he was only 30) had a tremendous impact on the Church of Scotland as well as religious life in Scotland. *The Memoir of McShane* by Andrew Bonar, a friend and fellow minister, is one of the great books of Scottish church history. Robert Murray McShane had the practice of praying on Saturday for his services in Dundee on Sunday, and those were lengthy times of prayer. A friend once asked him, “Do you ever omit those? Do you ever get so busy that you just skip that Saturday time of private prayer?” McShane’s answer was, “What would my people do if I do not pray?” He was concerned not only to preach on Sunday but also to pray for a long time on Saturday for people in his church.

The year 1843 was the year that Robert Murray McShane died, and it was an important year in Scottish Presbyterian history because there was a major division in the Church of Scotland. It was the climax of what is called “The 10-years conflict.” This was called “the disruption of 1843.” Words like “the seceders” and “the disruption” are used to describe the breaks in the history of the Church of Scotland. The two seceding groups were relatively small, but the disruption church was large. It had over 400 ministers and 400 elders. At least a third of the Church of Scotland left the established church in protest of a loose Erastianism, which at its cold heart had no love for the old Gospel. Then there was a fifth

Presbyterian Church in Scotland called the Free Church of Scotland. The first moderator of the Free Church was Thomas Chalmers. He had been in the state church. In fact, he was already ordained as a minister in the state church before he was converted. He was converted reading Pascal's *Pensees* and William Wilberforce's *Real Christianity*. It is always interesting to me to see the impact that these books have had through church history. We have studied Pascal's *Pensees* and Wilberforce's *Real Christianity*, and these two books were the ones God used to bring Thomas Chalmers to Himself. Chalmers then wrote, "I am most thoroughly convinced that on the system of 'Do this and live,' there is no peace. It is 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shall be saved.'"

There were other leaders as well in the Free Church of Scotland. William Cunningham was a great friend of Charles Hodge's. Cunningham was the professor of church history and a theologian at the Free Church College in Edinburgh. He is also the author of the two-volume *Historical Theology*, which is still a very valuable set of books. Another very interesting man was John Duncan. His friends called him "Rabbi Duncan." He was not a Jew, but he had been a missionary to the Jews in Budapest. He taught Old Testament at the college. He was a very interesting man because he liked to talk about all sorts of things, and his students remembered the things that he said. In fact, there is a new book published by Banner of Truth called *Just a Talker: Sayings of Rabbi John Duncan*. There are so many quotable things from John Duncan such as "Every sin will be adequately punished; blessed be God, not every sinner." Duncan was able to take some great thoughts and put them in short statements of a sentence or two. He is a wonderful person to study to get some very crisp and nice quotations for your sermons. Somebody said, "John Duncan was the only man I ever knew who appeared to believe and love every word of God without preferring one above another." That is a wonderful testimony to John Duncan.

We started class with a prayer from Horatius Bonar, who is called "Scotland's chief singer." He was one of the greatest hymn writers of Scotland. I love his hymns, including, "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say," "Not What These Hands Have Done," and "Go Labor on: Spend, and Be Spent." Well, it appeared then with the establishment of the Free Church of Scotland that there was finally some strong, evangelical, Bible-believing, missionary-minded church in Scotland. But, before many years, there was trouble in the new church.

We come to the ecclesiastical trial of William Robertson Smith. He was a member of the Free Church of Scotland and taught in one of the Free Church colleges. He was very much attracted to the higher criticism coming from Germany. There is an old saying that "theology is created in Germany, corrected in Scotland, and corrupted in America." I think the Scots must have made that up. In this case, theology was created in Germany, but it was not corrected in Scotland. It was consumed in Scotland by William Robertson Smith. His article on the Bible in the 1875 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* alerted people to the fact that teaching in a Free Church in Scotland was a man who really held to the higher, critical views coming out of Germany. For about five years, there was great turmoil in the church and a long ecclesiastical trial that people followed with a great deal of interest, reading every word spoken by people on both sides of the issue. Actually, the culmination of that trial was the expulsion of Robertson Smith from his teaching post in the church. But, despite what seemed to be a victory for the conservatives in that case, there was a growing willingness on the part of people in the Free Church to accept the higher, critical views. In 1883, the moderator, who was Horatius Bonar that year, warned the church that fellowship between faith and unbelief must sooner or later be fatal to the former. That sounds like something I heard from Richard John Newhouse, which he calls Newhouse's Law: "Where orthodoxy is optional, orthodoxy will sooner or later be proscribed."

By this time, there were a number of Scottish Presbyterian churches. Various church unions among the half dozen or more Presbyterian churches culminated in 1929 with the union of the Church of Scotland

and the United Free Church. I am not going to describe all of that because it is very complex. The United Free Church was formed in 1900 with the union of the Free Church of 1843 and the United Presbyterian Church that originated in 1847 from those seceder groups. These churches experienced a bewildering series of unions and schisms. If you are interested in trying to work this out, get a chart, and you might be able to follow it. The upshot of it all was that most of the Scottish Presbyterians came back together in 1929 in the Church of Scotland. In a way, everything ended up where it began.

There is an evangelical witness among Presbyterians in Scotland today. We could look in two places. There is a continuing Free Church. There were people, back in “the 1843 disruption,” who refused to go into the various mergers and maintain a separate existence today as the Free Church of Scotland. They were called by the Scots the “we-frees” because there were not many of them. The “we-frees” continue today with a Free Church College in Edinburgh, next to New College on the mounds, and churches particularly in the Highlands and out on the islands.

It was my privilege last summer to be on the Island of Lewis and go to the Free Church at Stornoway. These churches conduct their services in Gaelic as well as in English. In fact, they have two churches that meet simultaneously in two different buildings. There is one church but two congregations: English and Gaelic. I wanted to go to the Gaelic service to hear the Psalm-singing in Gaelic, but my host and hostess said that I ought to go to the English church so that I would know what was going on. So, I did attend the service there. The Free Church people use only the Psalms. They do not use instruments during their service, but they sing very well. They have long Presbyterian sermons and very orderly services. In fact, when you go into a Free Church, there is no music playing, and nobody is talking. There is absolute silence. Also, people fill out the pews. They are not sitting all over the place. They fill them up in a very orderly manner. The service in Stornoway (a little town in the Outer Hebrides) had 800 people there on Sunday morning in the English service. I do not know how many were in the Gaelic service. Our host and hostess were members at the church, and they invited my son and me to come back for the Sunday evening service, which we did. We found the same 800 people back again, which surprised me. They said, “Well, we go to church twice.” In fact, I heard that that little church way up in almost the remotest part of the British Isles has the largest Sunday evening church attendance of any church in the British Isles. There is no church in London that can produce 800 people on Sunday night. So, the Free Church is still there. They are an honorable group of people. They do struggle with a lot of things. They struggle to break out of their cultural isolation. I think most Scots view the Free Church as really not a very vital factor in the church life in the land. However, we can pray that God will bless these people, give them unity (which they need), peace, a missionary vision, and a heart for the Lord. They have the worship and the doctrine. If they could only get the fire to go with it, they could move out of their isolation into a much more prominent role in the life of Scotland.

The other place you can look for evangelicals today in the Church of Scotland or in the Presbyterian scene in Scotland is within the Church of Scotland. The Church of Scotland has not had a strong evangelical movement like the Church of England. But, there are hopeful beginnings of an evangelical movement within the Church of Scotland due to the work of men like William Still in Aberdeen, Eric Alexander, who was pastor at Saint George’s-Tron at Glasgow, and Sinclair Ferguson who, until recently, taught at Westminster Seminary but is now returning to Glasgow to be pastor of that same church. There is also something called the Rutherford House in Edinburgh, which is the Church of Scotland’s study center and the *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* edited by David Wright, who is senior lecturer in ecclesiastical history at the University of Edinburgh. So, some good things are happening, and we can trust that God will return a strong, Reformed witness to the land of John Knox.

“Seeing that we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is marked out for us” (Hebrews 12:1).