



Stewart of Cromarty

During Alexander Stewart's ministry in Cromarty (1824-47) he had as colleagues in the pulpits of the Black Isle Donald Sage, Resolis, John MacDonald, Ferintosh, the Kennedys of Killearnan, and, latterly, John MacRae, Knockbain. That little is remembered of him even in the area in which he laboured, compared with his contemporaries, is in keeping with his own estimate of himself. He wished to die *"unknelled, uncoffined, and unknown"*, and he appended to his will the following note: *"As my manuscripts are of no value, let them be destroyed"*. But the testimony of others to his character as a man and minister, and the surviving fragments of his sermons, indicate that he was an outstanding gift of God to the Church and that we can benefit from a study of his life and labours. Nothing more can be attempted here than to give a glimpse of the goodly land to be explored by those who can obtain the books which contain what has been preserved of the ministry of this master in Israel.

Alexander Stewart was born at the Manse of Moulin in September 1794. It was some years after Alexander's birth that his father, minister of Moulin since 1786, was awakened by grace and experienced the power of the doctrines which he was under vow to preach to others. The change in the minister and his ministry was used of God to produce a general awakening in the parish, and Alexander's half-brother and biographer believed that he then received impressions of divine things which were never effaced. Another event which influenced his subsequent life was his mother's death when he was five years old.

When his father became minister of Dingwall in 1805 Alexander was sent to Tain Academy, and during his four sessions there he was privileged to lodge with Dr Angus Mackintosh, whose wife was a daughter of Charles Calder, and sister of his stepmother. When Angus Mackintosh was a young man preparing for the ministry he stood one day with his father on the bridge over the River Findhorn in his native Strathdearn. *"Is not that fearful?"* said the older Christian to the student, as they looked over the parapet on the wild rush of the swollen waters; then after a pause he added with a solemnity the son never forgot, *"Much as I love you, I would rather see you swept away by that stream, than living to be a graceless minister."* Angus Mackintosh lived to be an instrument of blessing to many souls, and in his home Alexander Stewart would witness the life of a man whose conduct commended the Saviour he proclaimed. When Mackintosh thought he was dying he said to those around him: *"My kind friends would, if they could, construct a bridge to take me over Jordan; but oh! with what contempt I can look at everything else when I get but a glimpse of the finished work of Christ!"*

After two Sessions in Aberdeen University Alexander became a clerk in a relative's business in Perth, and while there his father expressed the hope that the Lord had made Himself savingly known to his soul. But it was after he went to work in a London office in 1813, and while he was under the ministry of a Mr. Clayton there, it became evident that he *"was now much awakened to the consideration of divine truth, and of his own personal interest in the salvation of Jesus."* In 1815 he returned home, desiring to devote himself to the preaching of the Gospel. It gave satisfaction to his father that his mind had been fixed on this work, *"even when he was under no paternal influence leading him that way"*, and as Alexander had an aunt in Glasgow it was arranged that he would complete his studies in that city.

In Glasgow Mr. Stewart associated with such men as Dr Love and Dr Chalmers, who were impressed with his remarkable ability and unaffected humility. He was not easily known, but those who knew him best were most impressed by spiritual and intellectual qualities. One to whom he unburdened himself was his fellow-student Alexander Beith, who, years afterwards, spoke of how

his friend impressed his conscience *"with a deep sense of the awful responsibility of appearing as a public teacher to speak in the name of Christ — the responsibility not merely, and not chiefly, to the hearers to whom I might address myself, but the responsibility to Christ Himself! 'What if HE should say, who hath required this at YOUR hand?'"*

Mr. Beith recalls that he often spoke *"many solemn words of the heavy moral obligation resting on us, in prospect of the ministry, to labour to be furnished for such a work, first by obtaining, through grace, the function of the Holy Ghost, and then by possessing all the outward preparation which scriptural knowledge, and theological acquirements generally, implied — a preparation for the ministry which was to be expected only through earnest, patient, unremitting study, and much prayer."*

Induction to Cromarty

As soon as his studies were completed he went to stay with Mr. Beith in Oban, and was licensed by the Lorn Presbytery in 1823. In November of that year he became minister of the Chapel of Ease in Rothesay, but in the following year he was inducted to the parish Church of Cromarty, Mr. Sage presiding at his induction. Writing to Mr. Sage prior to his induction he expressed the hope that this event was ordered *"by Him who does all things well, and whose prerogative it is to appoint for us the bounds of our habitation"*, and the conviction that *"whether the way be rough, or thorny, or "about", if it be the way which God approves of, it is the right way, and the only sure one.*

Cromarty, a fishing, manufacturing, and trading centre, had a native English-speaking population, though in the Highland area. Mr. Stewart was glad that he was not required to preach in Gaelic, as he was in Rothesay, for he did not consider himself proficient in that tongue, and he appreciated the seclusion which Cromarty afforded him. Being an English preacher in a Gaelic area probably contributed to his comparative obscurity, but the main reason was his extreme reserve and bashfulness.

He lacked self-confidence, was devoid of ambition, felt at ease only with friends and was content to devote all his energies to his own congregation, far away from crowds who would listen to his utterances with an admiration he could never understand. He illustrated his own remark: *"When any man has a just and proper sense of his own littleness and sinfulness, and of God's great majesty, the humblest service in God's house is accounted a high honour."* Some misunderstood and disliked him as a man, but those who knew him could testify that the reserve which some attributed to pride was due to a deep-seated feeling of insufficiency. Before he went to Glasgow his father wrote of him: *"By remaining here, he sinks involuntarily into his old habits of leaning upon his father, instead of thinking for and exerting himself; and then he learns to imagine that he can accomplish nothing, nor walk a step, without a hold."* And he was the same to the end. Whatever there was of natural defect in his reserve, he had much genuine, gracious humility. The man whose intellect was the admiration of the intellectuals of his day could stand beside the grave of *"a poor half-witted weaver lad, of whose conversion he had been the means,"* and acknowledge that he had been edified, instructed, and often comforted by his words. John Noble describes him as *"a truly gracious man . . . noted for his high and thorough Christian principles"*. Dr Kennedy *"was wont to say that Mr. Stewart gave him, as no other ever did, some idea of how much of the Divine image may be reproduced on fallen man"*. Hugh Miller, who was in his congregation and knew him intimately, regarded him as

"one of the most eminently excellent and loveable, and his entire character of the most transparent, childlike simplicity. The great realities of eternity were never far from his thoughts... And no one could be long in his company without having their thoughts turned towards that unseen world to which he has now passed, or without receiving emphatic testimony regarding that Divine Person who is the Wisdom and the Power of God".

The best preacher in Scotland

Mr. Stewart had his trials in Cromarty, as one can see from such volumes as *The Life and Letters of Hugh Miller* by Peter Bayne, but he was deeply attached to his people, and his labours were

blessed among them. When at last he was persuaded that it was his duty to accept a call to succeed Dr Candlish in St George's, Edinburgh, the thought of the change brought on an illness from which he died on 5th November, 1847; or, as Andrew Gray of Perth put it: *"The Lord, pitying the perplexities of his spirit, put an end to them by suddenly removing him to the upper sanctuary"*.

It was as a preacher Mr. Stewart made his mark. He preached at the first Free Church Assembly. Dr Chalmers described him as *"the best preacher in the Church of Scotland"*, and thought of him as his successor first in his charge and then in his chair. Dr Kennedy stated that although he had heard some of the ablest preachers on both sides of the Atlantic *"he never heard the Word of God so gloriously set forth, as regards loftiness of conception and perfection of oratory, as from the lips of Mr. Stewart"*. Discerning hearers refer to Stewart's *"loftiness of conception and perfection of oratory"*, *"genius, originality, and spirituality of mind"*. He was *"the man of original genius and sublime oratory"*, *"powerfully intellectual... not only sound and scriptural, but vivid, striking, and impressive... exquisitely simple and impressive"*. Hugh Miller found that his Sabbath School boys could always give a good account of Mr. Stewart's sermons when they could not remember a word of some who considered Mr. Stewart's preaching above the level of his people and tried to show him how to preach his mind. He exemplified the advice he gave to the newly licensed John Kennedy: *"Think well over your subject; do not be too careful as to your modes of expression; if you fail in language it is because you have not sufficiently studied your ideas"*. The profundity, simplicity, and effectiveness of his preaching were due to the faithfulness and freshness with which he brought out the mind of the Spirit in the Word. *"As to public ministrations"*, he wrote to a friend, *"my object is to let the Bible speak out"*.

Only one complete sermon is known to us — *"Man's Redemption the Joy of Angels"*, published in 1877 in *Precious Seed; Discourses by Scottish Worthies* — and it fully justifies Rev. D. Beaton's description: *"one of the great masterpieces of the Scottish pulpit"*. In 1864 Charles Stewart published *"The Tree of Promise; or, The Mosaic Economy a Dispensation of the Covenant of Grace"*. This volume contains an instructive biography of Alexander Stewart and his brief outlines of sermons on the Old Testament types, extended from the notes of hearers, etc. In 1883 Alexander Beith published *"The Mosaic Sacrifices"*, which partially covers the same ground as the earlier volume, but was compiled from the notes of a lady in the congregation who committed Mr. Stewart's sermons to writing from memory. Obviously these volumes cannot give an adequate idea of what Mr. Stewart was as a preacher. But they are much more instructive and inspiring than many of the polished productions of other men, and will repay the most careful study. Underlying these sermons is Mr. Stewart's conviction that *"eternal truth is embodied and illustrated in the Jewish dispensation... A well-instructed believer is one who, like Paul, understands both dispensations. Moses and Paul should be read together"*. From the Old Testament types he derives instruction regarding *"the priestly office of the Saviour"* and *"the spiritual worship of God, by the spiritual priesthood"*. Reviewing *"the Mosaic Sacrifices"* Spurgeon said, *"There is neither too much allegorising, nor too little"*.

A hearer wrote of his pulpit utterances: *"Every word is spoken as if the speaker felt himself standing in the presence of God, and in sight of the throne"*.

He spoke as one who lived upon the truths he proclaimed, and yearned for others to share what he enjoyed. Peter Bayne was a boy when he heard Stewart for the only time, but he never forgot his sermon on the Flood, which held a large congregation for at least an hour *"in attention as fixed and silent as that of a child hearing a wondrous tale from its mother"*. Bayne comments: *"He was an evangelical of the old school in his theology, and it was by a curious combination of qualities that sermons theologically as old as the Shorter Catechism were imbued with a true originality"*.

An illness he had in 1834 was blessed to teach him the language of consolation, which some of his most appreciative hearers felt was absent from his earlier discourses, and troubled souls rejoiced as he pointed them for comfort *"to Him who is thoroughly acquainted with our frame, — acquainted with it, not only as God the Creator of it, but also as man the inhabitant of it; — not only as Him who can look into all our sufferings, but as Him who entered into them all"*.

New light on familiar themes

God manifest in the flesh was the great theme in which he revelled.

"This great and dreadful God, this consuming fire, assuming the character and office of the Saviour of sinners. The Creator a creature! The Eternal an infant of days! The Omnipotent a man compassed with infirmities! The Supreme Lawgiver made of a woman, made "under the curse" of a violated law! The Supreme Lawgiver made of a woman, made "under the curse" of a violated law! The Majesty of heaven and earth an object of insult and derision to those very devils whom so lately His own right hand had hurled into hell! He who is emphatically the Living One, the Author and the Prince of Life, stretched cold and lifeless in the tomb! And what I cannot but feel to be the greatest wonder of all, the Holy One, — He whose absolute holiness angels adore with veiled faces — submitting to have sin imputed to Him, to have sin brought into immediate contact with Him; to be charged with guilt — remaining speechless as if guilty, standing like a condemned criminal at the judgment-seat of God and man, to be numbered with transgressors, and suffering the vilest, the most ignominious of deaths, as if He were the very chief of sinners!"

Alexander Stewart dwelt much upon the holiness of God and the guilt and loathsomeness of the sinner, and was filled with wonder at

"that wisdom which devised a scheme by which seeming impossibilities are performed, and things seemingly incompatible are reconciled! A holy God reconciled with sinful man; the law more honoured in the salvation of sinners than it is either in the happiness of angels, or the misery of devils; the greatest good extracted from the very essence of evil; Satan's schemes frustrated by their very success; the cross of Christ the instrument of His triumph; and the world, where God had been most dishonoured, made such a theatre of His glory as attracts the very inhabitants of heaven! He gloried in the Cross which contains in itself all that is to be known of God in heaven, in earth, and in hell together".

Rejoicing in the simple presentation of a Gospel in which he saw complexities beyond human comprehension he was aware of *"a bias, and a duplicity, and a dishonesty in the human heart on this subject"* and confessed:

"I despair of anything making religion in actual fact and practice a simple matter, except an outpouring of the Spirit from on high".

Knowing that some mistake *"a speculative belief in certain dogmas"* for saving faith, he proclaimed the necessity for regeneration in order to *"this giving in, this falling under, in the grand controversy which God has with each of us"*, which he regarded as essentially involved in embracing the Gospel.

Stewart deals with familiar themes in a way which sheds new light upon them and conveys the clarity and yet unfathomable depth of the Divine revelation. It is hoped that the inadequacy of this attempt to meet the Editor's request for a biographical sketch of Mr. Stewart will make readers industriously search out the volumes referred to above, for this man has left more behind him of permanent value to the Church than many of his contemporaries whose names are better known, and who may have been more widely useful in their own day.

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