

people were enslaved or not, without taking into account the wider circumstances of how they were being treated, and what the practical consequences of emancipation would be (if indeed it was even legally possible), is typical of Satan's driving the human race from one extreme to another.

The most important thing about Phillis Wheatley, however, is not that she was an African, or a slave, or a woman, but that she was a Christian. As she herself said in her poem, *On being brought from Africa to America*, it was better for her to be a slave in America on the way to heaven than to be free in Africa on the way to hell.

It is this basic truth that has stirred up the astonishing amount of anger, hatred, and misrepresentation to be found in the writings about her during the last century. Her life is a problem to left-wing, anti-Christian writers on feminism, race, and slavery and they find it almost impossible to be objective and to take the facts as they stand. Christ has given his people a higher view on these subjects: "Art thou called being a servant [or slave]? care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather. For he that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord's freeman: likewise also he that is called, being free, is Christ's servant" (1 Cor. 7:21-22).

**"Looking
for great
things":**

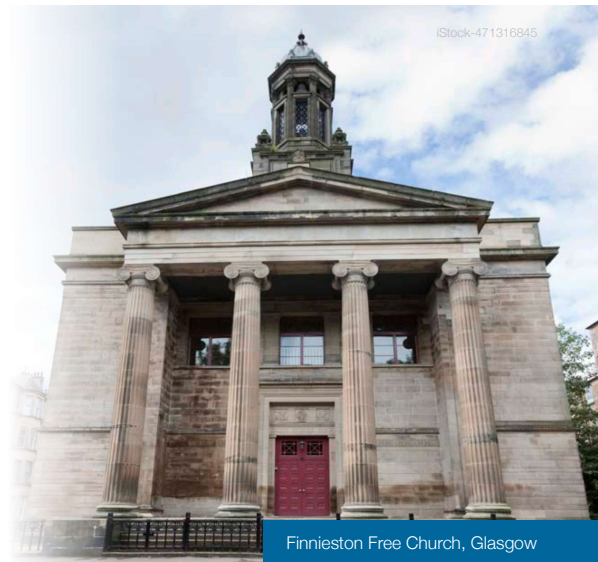
**Andrew
Bonar at
Finnieston**

MATTHEW VOGAN

In 1856, Andrew Bonar moved from the rural parish of Collace in Perthshire to the urban Finnieston Free Church congregation in Glasgow. He was looking for great things from the Lord.

One day a gentleman met with Rev. Andrew A. Bonar, presumably not long after he had begun his urban ministry in Finnieston, Glasgow. It was a fresh church plant, so

Bonar was asked the obvious question. "How are things doing with you? How are you getting on?" "Oh, we are looking for great things," Bonar responded brightly.



Finnieston Free Church, Glasgow

Perhaps taken aback by this upbeat answer, his friend cautioned, "You must not expect too much." Such grave instruction did nothing to dampen Bonar's spirits. "We can never hope for too much", was his decisive rejoinder.

It was indeed acutely descriptive of Bonar's tireless sowing the seed of the Word in hope. Clearly, he was not fettered by a "glass half-empty" presbyterian handwringing over the limitations of dark days. Yet what lay behind Bonar's attitude? Was it simply a sunny disposition or a naïve optimism? Those who knew him, understood that it must be something different; he was a man of prayer, faith, and deep study of the whole counsel of God. In time, refusing to set limits to the Almighty, Bonar witnessed the fruits of such faith and patient sowing of the seed.

I. BLOSSOMING WILDERNESS

Collace in rural Perthshire had been the scene of blessing and revival for Andrew Bonar. It was not easy to think of leaving. A ministry of eighteen years had witnessed a rich harvest. He did not, however, arrive at the parish to find a field that the Lord had blessed. It was a wilderness spiritually speaking. There were perhaps not more than half a dozen living Christians in the place, it was reckoned.

He laboured unstintingly, riding many miles every day, to see the scattered flock, no matter the weather. Every Sabbath morning, a Bible class was held for the young where he taught the Word with a lasting influence. He would preach twice on the Lord's Day and then ride several miles in the evening to preach somewhere else or to visit the sick.

A year after he was ordained, the revival of 1839 spread across parts of Scotland. McCheyne came from Dundee at times

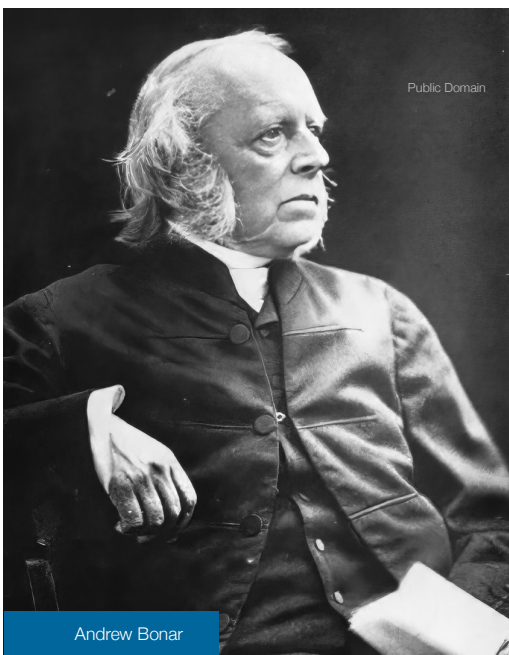
to assist with the preaching. Many came to Bonar to ask about conversion. Many walked long distances to hear the Word preached. Remarkable conversions were witnessed. One drunkard was transformed and later became an elder in the church. The parish was a different place, with the Sabbath seriously observed and family worship kept morning and evening in almost every household.

Bonar longed for more blessing, "Oh, that Collace were full of prayer like Kilsyth! Oh, that the church were full of people weeping for sin, and oh, that there were needing to be psalms sung to drown the weeping of the people as they get a sight of their sins!" Grace continued to abound and there were many blessed crowded communion seasons where the Lord's presence was mightily known, especially after the Disruption. When Bonar's ministry there came to a close, it was recorded with thankfulness. "When you came amongst us, Collace, as regards spiritual life, was comparatively a desert; when you left, it was like a 'watered garden – a field which the Lord had blessed.'"

II. MASSES OF SOULS

Bonar had been burdened for Glasgow for some time. In 1853 he confided in his Diary, "Sometimes I think my heart is drawn considerably toward working among the perishing multitudes at home in such places as Glasgow." Two years later he recorded, "I have been at Glasgow considering about the proposal of my removing to that sphere. I feel I should work with all my might and lose no time. What masses of souls there! Lord, guide me well!" He made it a matter of dedicated prayer and, at times, fasting also.

The Lord did open the way, indeed, for a call, though at times it seemed difficult, and



Andrew Bonar

some sought to urge Bonar otherwise. An opportunity opened in the rapidly expanding Finnieston district of Glasgow. Bonar felt the need deeply. "The thousands in that part of Glasgow (it is quite like a district of London) made me yearn; so few to care for them, and every day more houses built, and more souls arriving, richer and poorer. What think you? To leave Collace, I have always thought would be like Abraham leaving Ur of the Chaldees – that is, nothing but the clear call of the God of glory would effect it; but this seems to me like His call."

By August 1856, he told his congregation that he would be like Jonah if he did not go to Glasgow. Finnieston Free Church was a church plant from Free St Matthew's in 1856 when the first building was opened. Bonar was inducted on Thursday, December 4th. In his Diary he writes: "Lord, go forth with me. Today give me a baptism of the Holy Spirit that I may have new zeal, compassion, love to Thee and to souls..."

The work was demanding and initially the congregation was comparatively small. The densely populated district with its needs and challenges made Bonar feel "like a missionary to the heathen, who has to spend months in learning the language and habits of the people." "I must be content gradually to get acquainted with the faces and characters and the ways of my poor district, and to seek openings among the indifferent, the drunken, the lazy, the ignorant, the practical atheists, the bitter Papists, the formal professors, the young and old, sick and healthy."

Apparently, Bonar was quick to recognise faces, and this was a great help as he carried his message up the dark lanes and crowded closes of his parish. He had not forgotten the practical instruction he and his fellow students had received from Thomas Chalmers in parish evangelism. At that time, they had engaged in district visitation and now the mature pastor entered into a realisation of that vision.

Thirty years earlier David Naismith had caught Chalmers' vision and established the Glasgow City Mission and later the Edinburgh City Mission with the cry, "May the glory of God and the salvation of souls be our chief – our only end!" This was in an interdenominational context, but Bonar was taking forward a parish ministry in the way that Chalmers had envisaged.

III. DILIGENT PASTOR

Bonar had written to John Milne some years earlier, "a true pastor must labour – always visiting his people, always praying for them, and always ministering to their souls." These were not mere aspirations; this was a description of his pastoral work. As in his previous charge, he was systematic and dedicated in praying regularly for his people. Sometimes he would spread out the

communion roll and pray for each person and household in turn. Other times he visited the empty church during the week and moved from pew to pew, praying for those whose names were recorded there. "I never forget that God gave me a charge over your souls", he could say.

Every afternoon from one o'clock till nearly five he would be found walking about his parish, visiting his people. He was well known on the streets of the district. He became a well-known figure in the area, and his friendly way of speaking and behaving endeared him to all, including children. Little children would run up to him as he walked and put their hand in his and receive a smile and gentle hand laid on the head. One child called him "the minister with the laughing face". Soon after arriving in the city, he spoke to a little girl in the street, addressing her by name. The child ran home to her mother with the delighted cry, "Mither, mither, he kens me".

He would also be visiting many evenings during the week, as well as holding many meetings. There were Workers' Meetings, Children's Meetings, Men's Meetings, Women's Meetings, as well as the Wednesday Prayer Meeting. As soon as any illness, need, or trouble was known, he would come to them to offer support and assistance. Sick children were sure to receive a kindly gift like a picture book along with his visit. Those in the parish who did not belong to his flock were equally served. Some needed medicine, and he would ascend the flights of stairs to take it to them; others needed shelter, food or employment and he would do what he could. Sometimes he was asked to settle family disputes, as he records in his diary. "The Lord does not use me, like His servant Dr Chalmers, for great things, but my way of serving the Lord is walking three

or four miles to quiet a family dispute!"

A visit from the minister was usually unannounced and lasted from half an hour to an hour. He first asked after the health and welfare of the various members of the household. Before long he would turn the conversation to spiritual things, perhaps addressing himself particularly to the young, before he concluded with family worship.

People knew instinctively of his interest in them and compassion for them. "Love", he said "is the motive for working; joy is the strength for working." Friday and especially Saturday were then set apart exclusively in preparation for the Sabbath. Principal Patrick Fairbairn told his students that if they wished to be successful in their calling they should "go to Finnieston and enter into the spirit of its minister." If they went, they would perhaps be surprised by the simple, straightforward approach to preaching. Not necessarily an eminent orator, Bonar's preaching manner with its sing-song style would come across as distinctly old-fashioned. Yet, while they might have been distracted by the way that he would suddenly let his voice drop in the pulpit, they would have been struck by the fresh light on Scripture and the utter persuasion of the reality of eternal matters. Thus, he "rarely, if ever, closed [a sermon] without urging on his hearers the immediate acceptance of the Saviour."

IV. WINNING SOULS

Within a year of Bonar's arrival, a missionary was appointed to assist in evangelistic work in the district. The missionary would visit homes in the area and arrange services suited to the unchurched, and in time he needed the assistance of several others. In a large hall near the original church, services were conducted for the mission church, with Bonar often preaching himself

on a Lord's Day evening. It is said that the average attendance was around 300. Those converted at this mission station ultimately became members in the Finnieston congregation.

When the original church in Finnieston was closed for repairs in 1865, the congregation met in a local school for two months. The number of those gathering increased considerably. When they returned to the church building, Bonar continued to hold a service in the school for several years, having recognised that many who had joined them would not come to the church building.

In a report submitted to the Free Church Committee on Glasgow Evangelization for the year 1858, he said that he had visited over 600 families during his first year in the parish. He had engaged in open-air preaching regularly and he had ensured tract distribution around the church that reached over 1,000 homes each month.

As Bonar himself wrote, "To win souls, and to know God more, and then to be in the kingdom – is all my desire." He was able to edify many with the books and booklets he wrote, and he took evident delight in these things. Yet as one observed concerning him, "in his estimation the saving of souls is, after all, nobler work than the achievement of mere literary distinction and renown." On 1st December 1878, a new larger church building was opened near the West End Park, and it was usually filled to capacity. Bonar requested that three Hebrew words be carved over the door. They were those translated as "He that winneth souls is wise", which had graced the wall of the study in the Collace manse. Bonar explained that these words indicated the purpose of the church's existence. Perhaps a passing Jew might also be brought inside by them. He

took this text for his sermon at the opening of the church. The word "winning", he explained, described a hunter engaged in stalking game and therefore soul-winning required great wisdom and skill. He used to say about different methods of evangelistic work, "There is more originality in a full heart than in anything else."

V. NUMEROUS WORKERS

Like Chalmers, Bonar knew that a minister's labours alone could not effectively reach a densely populated district. He urged his congregation to carry the message with them. They were not simply to come and go and be passive receivers of the Word. "When God comes to a man, He does not only say 'Arise, receive!' but 'Arise, shine!'" Preaching to his congregation in 1889, he pressed this on them with urgency: "Go away now, and tell others about salvation and the Saviour. Go and spread the tidings to all men of 'peace' by the Saviour's work ... Sit not down in selfish enjoyment when your hearts are burning within you after some fresh discovery of the riches of grace in John 3:16: 'God so loved the world that he have his only Begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.' Go and tell men these same tidings. And if more were needed to induce you to do so, this might be added, viz., in the very act of telling your fellow-men of this salvation you yourself get immense gain. In a word, if you would have your sanctification carried on, if you would have your own communion perfected, go forth with these words ringing in your ears: 'As the Father hath sent Me, even so send I you.'"

He believed that no one should exempt themselves from responsibility for the lost. "Every one of you should do something, so far as opportunity is afforded you, in this great and all-important matter, the winning



of unsaved souls to Christ... The Lord, who saved your soul, expects that you, being saved, will never fail to be on the watch to bring others to salvation...Who is there among you, younger or older, who could not do something for souls from day to day?" It might be even in our manner of life. For "if believers are full of the Spirit, full of love to souls, the world sees they have got something that earth cannot give, and when they show by their joy in Christ that they are satisfied, the world would like to get at their secret."

Bonar wanted "to lead, if possible, every individual believer, every communicant, every professing disciple, to the conviction that it is altogether a mistake and a grievous error for any to let others work for the conversion of souls, while he himself looks on, praying perhaps and approving, but not taking part."

Bonar could be very pointed and direct, and his challenge carries down to us. "O believer, have you done all you would fain do? Is it no fault of yours if souls are not saved? O elders, are you devising means for winning souls?"

If the first meeting of workers in the congregation numbered only twelve, their numbers were soon augmented. There was

work for tract distributors, district visitors, Sabbath school teachers, and those who would read and distribute the Scriptures to needy souls. When someone moved from the country to join Finnieston Church, Bonar would take them to the Bible class, then to see the Sabbath school, and it was not long before they had been found some work to engage in within the sphere of the congregation.

Bonar believed that "the way to rise high in Christ's kingdom is to serve much". "We will hear a great deal in the day of the Lord of how the workers found the lost pieces of silver", he encouraged them. "If you say your hands are full, it is just what they ought to be!" He expected them to put their shoulders to the work, although he counselled one woman involved in Bible work against overwork. It was hard work. Quoting Isaiah 32:20, "Blessed are ye that sow beside all waters", he said, "You know that the ox is the symbol of laborious strength, and the ass is not a little remarkable for its stubbornness. If you would be persevering and successful in your work, including as it does among other things such weary climbing of stairs, you will have need of this strength of the ox, and this patient stubbornness of the ass!"

VI. PRODUCTIVE SABBATHS

Let us join Bonar and his congregation for a Sabbath day. Perhaps he leaves the manse a little earlier in the morning, hoping that on the way he might find someone whom he can persuade to go to church or to the Bible class. Then at half-past ten there is the Elders' Prayer-Meeting in the vestry before the morning service. Between the morning and afternoon services, he goes into the little prayer-meeting held in the session-house. After the afternoon service at half-past five there is the young men's Bible-class, then a visit to the Sabbath school is expected. In the evening there will always be a service in the church or mission-hall. Or perhaps he might engage in open-air preaching from the steps of the church to a crowd reaching to the other side of the street. By nine o'clock at night, his labours and a day of fellowship and service in the courts of the Lord are ended.

VII. CONCLUSION

We may not align with all of Bonar's doctrine and practice, yet his devotion to the Lord and his love for the lost shine as beacons to us. Yet he would have been the last to commend himself. "I have been learning my littleness...Less than the least of all saints. And yet to me grace has been given to win souls now and then, and especially to help those that win souls."

Andrew Bonar looked for great things, not with mere passive expectance but labouring actively in dependence on the Lord. And in a measure, he did see great things. In 1858, the attendance numbered about 250, but it eventually grew to over 1,000 by the time that his ministry closed in 1892. If we, like William Carey, truly expect great things from God then surely we will be prompted to attempt great things for him. It is all too easy to limit the Lord and to

prophesy that any similar endeavours will come to nothing. Or to act as though the Lord has to do the work of reaching the lost without us.

Of course, it takes us out of our comfort-zone and brings fears or concerns with it. Bonar knew that too. "I have come to believe this to be almost invariably true, that seldom is anything good proposed to us but we have something to object to in it at first. This seems to be the reason for the expression used by our Lord – 'Thrust forth labourers'. We are all unwilling to go. The truth is, we are all a little lazy. We need to be 'thrust forth'."

It was not necessarily something that came altogether naturally to him either. At the very start of his ministry, he could say, "I never before felt the extreme difficulty of being absorbed in the desire of saving souls as my sole object, and of taking the glory of God as my simple aim." And at the very end of his ministry he lamented, "So very much of self has been in all my ministry, so very little of Christ's compassion for souls." "It seems to me that when I began my ministry, I had a spark of love to souls cast into my heart from Christ's great love which has a most vehement flame; but that spark has remained a spark to this day instead of being multiplied every year till I was all fire."

How did Chalmers' vision of parish evangelisation (carried forward by Bonar) become eclipsed after the Victorian age? No doubt there were some factors, such as the various divisions in the Free Church at the end of the Victorian era. This resulted in smaller bodies with more gathered congregations, especially in urban locations. No doubt the poverty experienced by ordinary Christians in the Highlands, and the higher proportion of

church attendance in those communities, made it less of a proposition.

Yet these social factors would change as the twentieth century progressed, without any strong recovery of the Chalmers vision. Fewer ministers and increased administrative responsibilities have also had their impact. It was not entirely different in Bonar's time. "You said you had no time", he writes to a brother minister. "Have you not time for all duty, and this was a duty?" Beyond this, however, it seems that we do not have Bonar's passion and we are not as McCheyne was described: "just deen to have folk converted".

No doubt certain exceptions might be made in relation to some congregations presently but, overall, while the need is even greater than it was in Bonar's day, the endeavour

is much less. Indeed, many congregations are almost the exact opposite of Finnieston in the level of activity. The reality is that little is expected of church members in seeking to reach a population ever more unchurched. "If you shine as lights now, and cast your light on the shadows around you, you will hear of it in the ages to come. If you do not, God will get others to do it." No doubt this is as much true of churches as it is of individuals.

"I need more compassion for souls", Bonar confessed. And it may be that there is some echo within us of the same cry. Perhaps a good way to learn from Bonar would be to make use of his petitions at the throne of grace. "I have been asking calm faith, burning love, deep peace, bright hope, true compassion for souls, glowing zeal for God's glory."

Sam Semmens (1936-2024)

Sam Semmens was born and brought up in Killough, Co. Down, in 1936. It was a small, predominantly Roman Catholic, fishing village, though it seems that he had neither education nor family religion in his early days. He joined the RAF at the age of 15, having taught himself to read. He was converted through a SASRA ministry at some point. He became an ardent Protestant and was a great friend of the late Rev. Sinclair Horne, the longstanding Secretary and Lecturer of the Scottish Reformation Society. Latterly (from the late 1980s) Sam gained two degrees

(CEng and MEng) through Napier College/University.

Sam was a valued member of the SRS Committee from 2005-2008. He was a deacon in St Columba's Free Church pre-2000 and in the Free Church (Continuing) till his passing, though, through declining health, he was unable to attend after Covid.

Sam died on 13th March 2024. He leaves a widow and three daughters. A son by a previous marriage, Sam Jr, predeceased him. Sam passed away aged 87.