III.

THE ABERDEEN INQUIRY.

The following additional extracts from the Report will show the character of the testimonies to the depth, the extent, and permanent effects of the movement, which the queries of the Committee elicited “As to the extent of this work of God,” wrote the Rev. R. M’Cheyne, “I believe it is impossible to speak decidedly. The parish is situated in the suburb of a city containing 60,000 inhabi­tants. The work extended to individuals residing in all quarters of the town, and belonging to all ranks and denominations of the people. Many hundreds under deep concern for their souls have come, from first to last, to converse with the ministers; so that I am deeply persuaded the number of those who have received saving benefit is greater than anyone will know till the judgment-day.. . .

“It is not easy for a minister, in a field like this, to keep an exact account of all the cases of awakening and conversion that occur; and there are many of which he may never hear. I have always tried to mark down the circumstances of each awakened soul that applied to me, and the number of these, from first to last, has been very great. During the autumn of 1839 not fewer than from 600 to 700 came to converse with the ministers about their souls; and there were many more equally concerned, who never came for­ward in this way. I know many who appear to have been converted, and yet have never come to me in private; and I am, every now and then, meeting with cases of which I never before heard. Indeed, eternity alone can reveal the true number of the Lord’s hidden ones among us. . . .

“During the progress of this work of God, not only have many individuals been savingly converted, but important effects have also been produced upon the people generally. . . . It seems now to be allowed, even by the most ungodly, that there *is* such a thing as conversion. Men cannot any longer deny it. The Sabbath is now observed with greater reverence than it used to be; and there seems to be far more of a solemn awe upon the minds of men than formerly. I feel that I can now stop sinners in the midst of their open sin and wickedness, and command the irreverent attention, in a way that I could not have done before. The private meetings for prayer have spread a sweet influence over the place. There is far more solemnity in the house of God; and it is a different thing to preach to the people now from what once it was. Any minister of spiritual feeling can discern that there are many praying people in the congregation. When I came first here, I found it impossible to establish Sabbath-schools on the local system; while, very lately, there were instituted with ease, nineteen such schools, that are well taught and well attended. . . .

“During the autumn of 1839 the meetings were in general dis­missed at ten o’clock; although, in several instances, the state of the congregation seemed to be such as to demand that the ministers should remain still longer with them, that they might counsel and pray with the awakened. I have myself, once or twice, seen the service in the house of God continue till about midnight. On these occasions the emotion during the preaching of the word was so great, that after the blessing had been pronounced at the usual hour, the greater part of the people remained in their seats, or occupied the passages, so that it was impossible to leave them. In consequence of this a few words more were spoken suited to the state of awakened souls; singing and prayer filled up the rest of the time. In this way the meeting was prolonged by the very necessity of the case. On such occasions I have often longed that all the ministers in Scotland were present, that they might learn more deeply what the true end of our ministry is. I have never seen nor heard of anything indecorous at such meetings; and on all such occasions, the feelings that filled my soul were those of the most solemn awe, the deepest compassion for afflicted souls, and an unutterable sense of the hardness of my own heart. I do entirely and solemnly approve of such meetings, because I believe them to bein accordance with the word of God, to be pervaded by the Spirit of Christ, and to be oft-times the birth-places of precious never-dying souls. It is my earnest prayer that we may yet see greater things than these in all parts of Scotland.” . . .

The movement in Perth was of rather more recent date, and therefore not so fully tested by time; but its results, so far as they had yet appeared, were equally satisfactory. “I had abundant opportunity,” says the Rev. John Milne, “of becoming intimately acquainted with Mr. Burns, as he lived and laboured with me con­stantly for between three and four months. I never knew anyone who so fully and unfalteringly obeyed the apostolic precept, ‘Medi­tate upon these things, give thyself *wholly* to them.’ I was struck with his close walk with God, his much and earnest prayer, his habitual seriousness, the solemnizing effect which his presence seemed to have wherever he went, and his almost unvaried success in lead­ing those with whom he conversed to anxious, practical, heart-searching concern about their state in God’s sight. In public, his ministrations were chiefly of an awakening nature, addressed to the unconverted. . . .

“In compliance with the language of the query, I have spoken of the chief human instrument; but I am persuaded, both from what I saw and felt at the time, and from what I have since known of the permanent and blessed results, that a greater than man was among us; ‘Not by power, nor by might, but by my Spirit.’ I never witnessed before, nor have I since, such manifest tokens of God’s gracious presence as were vouchsafed us during several of the first months of last year. I can only say in the words of Jonathan Edwards, ‘The goings of God were then seen in his sanctuary, God’s day was a delight, and his tabernacles were amiable.—Our public assemblies were then beautiful; the congregation was alive in God’s service, every one earnestly intent on the public worship, every hearer eager to drink in the words of the minister as they came from his mouth.’ What he also mentions of the much weeping and deep concern manifested under the preaching of the word, is also true in regard to the meetings here. . . .

“I had only been settled here a few weeks when the revival began, and consequently had little previous knowledge of the people. I have since, however, had intercourse with many. Some were godly persons before; but on these occasions they seem to have been literally revived and stirred up. They received enlarged and more realizing and influential views of their privileges and duties as Christians. The generality, however, were persons who had either been greatly careless of religion, or had been resting self-satisfied in a form of godliness, though destitute of its power. . .

“Many are to this day *growingly* adorning the gospel of God their Saviour in all things, and gradually forming a peculiar people zealous of good works. I am acquainted with families where all or almost all the members seem to have been savingly converted.”

To the sane effect and equally emphatic were the testimonies of the Rev. Mr. Gray of Perth, Mr. Boner of Collace, Mr. M’Donald, Blairgowrie, Mr. Cumming of Dunbarney, Mr. Paton of Ancrum, and other ministers of equal worth and high standing in the Church, who, while recognizing the occurrence of incidental errors of human infirmity, united in bearing solemn witness to the solidity, precious­ness, and enduring benefit of the sacred work itself.

The following valuable letter addressed to myself in the present year by the Rev. David Brown, D.D., Professor of Theology in the Free Church College, Aberdeen, on the retrospect of an entire generation, enables us still further to trace the history, by connecting the present with the past

“*Aberdeen, October 18th,* 1869.—MY DEAR DR. BURNS,—As my place of residence, during the remarkable religious movement which took place here in connection with your honoured and beloved brother’s ministrations was at some distance from Aberdeen, I am not able to speak from personal knowledge either of its character­istics at the time, or of its permanent fruits. But being put in pos­session of nearly all that went on from week to week by friends on the spot, I considered myself nearly as well able to estimate its true character as those who were in the midst of it, the more especially as I was cognizant of the movements at Kilsyth and Perth, so very similar to that at Aberdeen, had studied the history of similar move­ments in former times, and took a lively interest in the subject. Thus furnished, I had no difficulty in recognizing in this movement the hand of God, touching the hearts of multitudes at once with a sense of sin and danger, with anxiety for salvation, and with wonder and delight as the way of escape from the wrath to come was laid open to them, turning many from darkness to light, from wretchedness to peace and joy in believing, and from sin to holiness in heart and life; and, what was even more manifest, giving to many real Chris­tians a quickening, an enlargement, and a vigour unknown before.

“As to the permanent fruits of this work, from all I can learn it seems to have much resembled that of all similar movements. In other words, all that was mere religious excitement in it gradually disappeared, and what was only apparent conversion ended, in the case of some, unhappily, in others in mere outward improvement. But to be more explicit, (1) The minister in whose church Mr. Burns most laboured, Mr. Mitchell of Holburn, tells me that of about eighty young persons admitted by him at that time to the privileges of the Church, he can say with good confidence that one-half turned out decidedly well, and that of the other half, those who disappointed him did so for the most part in consequence of their ‘yoking them­selves unequally with unbelievers,’ or marrying persons who had no sympathy with spiritual things. (2) Two of the elders of the late Mr. Parker of Bonaccord tell me that Mr. P., who was of all men the furthest from religious enthusiasm, was induced to ask Mr. B. to officiate in his church from a strong impression that the Lord was remarkably with that young preacher; that when asked to put a stop to his proceedings, he went to judge for himself, and, as the result, refused to do so; and one of them said that when one of the ministers of the Presbytery, during the examination in this business, threw out some contemptuous insinuation against Mr. B., Mr. Parker exclaimed that he ‘wondered that even a dog would wag his tongue at such a man.’ The gentleman from whom I had this, I may add, taught a class of those who had got good under Mr. Burns, and another was taught by another of the gentlemen with whom I have spoken on this subject within the last few days, who bears the same testimony to the solidity of the work, testifying in particular how anxious Mr. B. was that the converts should be gathered and systematically instructed in Bible truth. Both these gentlemen are acting elders in our churches, and men of sober judgment. (3) I conclude with extracts from letters written to me by two of those I consulted a few days ago on this subject. The first is from one of the two just referred to:—‘It is consistent with my knowledge that the fruit of the Rev. W. C. Burns’ labours in this quarter is still to be seen, and it always cheered the hearts of those who used to hear his living voice, and were blessed through him, to read the accounts given from time to time of his work in China.’ The other is more full. It is from one who taught a similar class or classes to that of the other two gentlemen, and has himself done much Christian work here and elsewhere:—‘Agreeably to your request, I give my testi­mony to the permanency of the revival work begun under the ministry of the Rev. William Burns in Aberdeen nearly thirty years ago. Along with some others I had classes of young women, held in our own houses weekly, mine continuing for about three years with fluctuations. The classes were composed of those who professed to have been awakened at that time. They are now much scattered: but I have been privileged to attend the death-beds of some of them, and their end was peace—one indeed was triumphant. There are several whom I knew for years, some of them under very severe trials, which they bore with Christian meekness and resignation. Others went back to the world, and I have lost sight of them. I believe the great day alone will bring to light the fruits of his mani­fold and devoted labours in this quarter. The intelligence of his death brought sadness and sorrow to many a heart here.’—DAVID BROWN.”