

Professor John Duncan¹

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THE spiritual firmament of the Free Protestant Church of Scotland at the time of the memorable Disruption in 1843 was, by the gracious blessing of God, adorned with a galaxy of stars of the first magnitude - men of eminent grace, commanding gifts, and untiring energy in the service of Christ. There were burning and shining lights in those days, in the enjoyment of whose bright, warm, and holy radiance thousands of God's people delighted to walk. Glory then dwelt in marked degree in our land, and not until the Spirit is poured again from on high will the present wilderness blossom anew as the rose.

One of these bright, shining stars in the spiritual firmament of the past forms the subject of the present lecture. Not that Dr. Duncan occupied so prominent a place before the eyes of the Church as some other men of renown who might be mentioned - Drs. Chalmers, Cunningham, Candlish, Begg, Macdonald, and others - who were outstanding and active leaders in church courts and on platforms in all practical efforts for the advancement of the evangelical cause.

The star to which our attention is presently directed may be said to have been less conspicuous to general view, not because he was of less magnitude, but because he moved, for most part, in a more select and exalted orbit than others - more among the infinities and eternities than among the ordinary things of time and sense. His biographer (Dr. Brown) justly said of him that he was "one of the most remarkable men of this or of any age," remarkable for profound and varied thoughts, vast learning, deep humility, intense spirituality, and exclusive devotedness to the service of the Lord Jesus.

True, he was also remarkable for a certain absence of mind and irregularity in the ordinary habits of life, as well as for an incurable aversion to the pen - (almost all his discourses and striking sayings were taken down by others) - but possibly all this was divinely ordered so as to prevent hero-worship and glorying in men on the part of admiring friends, dispositions to which fallen human nature, even in the best regulated persons, is exceedingly prone. So much, briefly, by a way of introduction; now to the narrative. I shall begin at the beginning of his life's history.

¹ This biographical sketch of Dr. Duncan was delivered as a lecture to the Blythswood Literary Society

John Duncan was born of humble and pious parentage in the year 1796 at Gilcomston, in the parish of Old Machar, Aberdeen. His father, whose Christian name also was John, was "a plain working shoemaker" to trade, and a member of the Original Secession Church to religious profession. His mother, Ann Mutch, was the daughter of a well-to-do farmer and blacksmith, who lived in the country outside of Aberdeen. Originally of the Established Church, she became a member of the Secession Church before she married. Being on a visit to some relatives in Aberdeen, she was persuaded by an acquaintance to go to the Secession Church, where she heard the Rev. James Templeton, a worthy minister of the gospel.

"From that day," Dr. Brown tells us, "She worshipped nowhere else; the grace of God took possession of her heart; her whole character was changed. By her Christian influence, a brother and sister joined her; and all three, being received into full, communion with the Secession Church, walked every Lord's Day from Belhelvie (their native place) to Aberdeen and back, a distance of twelve miles, to church." Mr. Duncan, senior, was a member of this congregation, and it was, to all appearance, here that Ann Mutch and he made their first acquaintance.

There were several children by the marriage, but all died in infancy except John, who was the eldest, and he was at best a weakly boy. It is related that an attack of small-pox at a very early age "brought him to the gates of death." One of his mother's sisters came to see him die, but as she stood and looked upon the poor infant, these words from the 118th Psalm (metrical version) strongly entered her mind: "I shall not die but live, and shall the works of God discover." This, a message of hope concerning the recovery of the apparently dying child, proved also a prediction of future experience and usefulness, as after years verified, to the very full. The terrible disease of small-pox, however, left with him one serious physical defect. It deprived him of the total sight of an eye. In after life, he used playfully to boast to his friend, Dr. Brown, that he could see better with his one eye than most people could do with their two - a feature, indeed, in the sphere of mental perception that was abundantly demonstrated.

His mother died when he was five or six years of age. This was to him a great loss. As her only surviving child, he was the subject of many prayers. Her warm, loving, and prayerful breath was withdrawn from him, and he was left to the care of his father, who, though a good man, was exceptionally stern and hard

of temperament. His maternal uncle and aunt, who now dwelt in Old Aberdeen, showed him, however, the greatest sympathy and kindness; and a wonderful boy they thought him.

From his very earliest years he exhibited a predilection for the work of preaching. He would often mount a chair and imitate the minister, and when sent to school he might be observed getting up on a cart and giving a harangue in preaching fashion to his companions who assembled. Dr. Brown also relates that one day "his aunt went to dig potatoes in a field which they had near the sea, taking John with her on her back. On reaching the spot he descried over her shoulder a ship in the distance, and directing her attention to it, exclaimed, 'That's the ship that's to take me to preach to the heathen.' 'But what if they winna hear you?' 'Then I'll gang to some other place,'" cried the quick little fellow.

Alongside this desire for the ministry there sprang up an intense passion for learning. Even when very young he longed for the day when he would enter the university. On one occasion, when he was very ill, he was heard to exclaim several times, "O that God would spare me till I get on the red cloakie!" the red gown worn by the Aberdeen University students.

I cannot omit to notice here that Mr. Duncan, senior, married a second time, when the boy was about eight years of age. His wife, whose name was Sophia Sutherland, was, at the time of their union, an Episcopalian, but she afterwards became a staunch Seceder. Step-mothers have often the reputation of being cold and unsympathetic towards the children who are not their own offspring, but it was far from being so in the present case. She stepped into the relationship in the most affectionate and motherly spirit, and proved a noble substitute for the tender parent he had lost.

Dr. Duncan regarded his step-mother to the day of her death with the deepest "gratitude, affection, and reverence." She was truly an excellent Christian woman, who loved him, all the more when he became, in after years, a monument of divine grace and a humble follower of the Lamb. In his boyhood days she perceived that there was something uncommon about him, and that education was the life he was fitted for. His father insisted that he should become a shoemaker like himself, and put him on a stool in their little kitchen, which served as a workshop, but he was a failure in acquiring the art of shoemaking. "In his awkward fingers," says his biographer, "everything went wrong; threads were badly waxed; soles were spoiled, and patches were

botched," until at length his tears and sobs aroused all the sympathies of his devoted step-mother, and she prevailed upon his father to take him off the working stool.

As I have already hinted; his father was severe to a fault, as many parents were in those olden days - in our time the pendulum has largely swung to the opposite pole of indulgence and the result was that the boyish resentment would sometimes show itself in almost amusing ways. Being displeased with his father's severity on one occasion, when he was probably learning Latin at the Aberdeen Grammar school, he made his last will and testament in these brief but comprehensive and rhythmical terms: "*Omne matri, nihil patri*" (to mother all, to father nothing). The city of Aberdeen is famous for its Grammar School, an educational institution of great value, which has had a succession of distinguished masters from almost time immemorial.

John Duncan entered this school in the year 1805-6, when he was nine years old. Here he spent five years, and had the reputation of being a clever scholar. His passion for languages then began to show itself, and also his passion for a subject, at the time, apparently beyond his years, metaphysics. Long after he said to Professor Knight, "When at the Grammar School of Aberdeen, I got hold of a volume of George Campbell (a Principal and Professor of Divinity at Aberdeen), in which he ridicules as lamentable folly the notion that to God there is no past, present, or future - to Him all are one. I remember well how I abhorred George Campbell for that. I thought it the most magnificent chapter I had ever met with."

It must not be concluded, however, that the budding metaphysician and profound linguist was a mere dreamy bookworm and recluse. He was as full of fun and frolic as any other boy, and went for his holidays to an uncle's farm some miles north of Aberdeen, where he tended the cattle and played with a cousin during the vacation season. At the age of fourteen he matriculated at the University for the first time, and so at last got on the red cloakie, which had been the object of his earnest longing even on a sick bed years before.

One would have naturally expected that a youth of his uncommon ability and passionate devotion to books would have won a brilliant place in his University classes, but the result was not so. The irregularity in study and the absent-mindedness that characterised him all through life began to manifest themselves. He was probably reading far more than any student there in various departments of literature, but to stick to the methodical routine of

class study was by no means his forte and so he failed to take any place of distinction in his classes.

Books, however, were his constant companions in all circumstances, whether he was sitting at home or walking by the way, and though mental absent-mindedness was one side of his character, mental absorption was another side. Whatever subject he was interested in at the moment, it absorbed all his attention to the forgetfulness of everything else. On one occasion he was walking along on the south turnpike road of Aberdeen intensely reading a book. He became so absorbed in it that not till "his weary limbs" began to fail did he look up to find himself well-nigh at Stonehaven, a distance of nearly sixteen miles.

He finished his course at the University, and took his degree of M.A. in the spring of 1814. By this time Mr. Duncan had also become a student in divinity. It was customary for young men who were going forward to the ministry in connection with the Constitutional Associate Presbytery (Anti-Burgher) to begin their divinity studies between the third and fourth years of their Arts course. He was admitted as a divinity student by the Presbytery on 27th July, 1813, and attended a short session in divinity, beginning on the 1st of September.

He was orthodox in his views at this period, but he was far from being spiritually prepared for the ministerial office. In 1816 he left the Secession and joined the Established Church of Scotland. He became a member in the congregation of the famous Dr. James Kidd, minister of Gilcomston Chapel of Ease, and Professor of Oriental Languages in Marischal College, Aberdeen. Dr. Kidd was a man of marked individuality and a powerful preacher of the gospel, whose wholesome influence was felt over all the city of Aberdeen, but his faithful ministry did not produce any beneficial impression at this stage on the mind of young Duncan, as he himself bore testimony years afterwards.

In January, 1817, he presented himself for enrolment as a student of divinity in the Established Church of Scotland. His father, not too pleased already that he had left his own (the Secession) Church, and knowing the spiritual unfitness of his son for the ministry, was nearly distracted, and went to Dr. Brown, the Professor of Divinity, with "heavy complaints" against him, so as, if possible, to prevent his admission. But it would appear that the complaints were not of such a definite nature as could be handled to found proceedings upon in a concrete way, and so Dr. Brown, after consultation with Dr. Kidd, who had

given a certificate in Duncan's favour, could not refuse to enrol him. He was, therefore, enrolled in regular form.

But the worst has not yet been told. It was his own startling confession, uttered at different times to intimate friends during his future history, with expressions of deep sorrow, that he was an Atheist when he first entered the Divinity Hall of the Established Church. Referring in particular to the class of Dr. Mearns, one of the professors, he said, "I was an Atheist when I entered his class." Again, "I had a good upbringing, but I broke off from it. I had three years of dreary Atheism, and during the time I made a doctrinal atheist of a pupil of mine who died." And still again he said, "I was much indebted to - Dr. Mearns. It was under him that I gave up Atheism."

To another friend (Mr. Knight) he expressed himself to the effect that he was three years a Spinozist or Pantheist, and to others, still, that he fell into materialistic Atheism, denying the existence of God, of angelic spirit and of human soul. Putting these testimonies together, he concluded that he fell for a short season, to begin with, into complete materialism, and that he afterwards rose to the slightly more elevated platform of Pantheism, but regarded it as no better than Atheism in effect. Having lost all definite belief in a personal Deity, and esteeming the all of the universe to be God and God to be the all without conscious existence, there is no doubt he was only a shade in intellectual belief above black and unmitigated Atheism, and he manifestly esteemed himself to be without any God in the strict sense of the word to look to or exercise confidence in. One hopeful sign was that he was not happy in this condition. The years of Pantheistic Atheism were "dreary years," years of darkness and misery.

Dr. Mearns, the distinguished professor, was, by God's blessing, his deliverer out of this horrible pit, although for years afterwards he was Christless. Dr. Mearns impressive prayers and "severely rational and convincing" lectures combined to produce this favourable result. He came now to a definite belief in a personal God, transcendent above the universe, although immersed in it, and this intellectual conviction (which he never afterwards lost) appears to have been followed and backed by a ray of divine light, for he said in one of his accustomed walks to his friend, Miss Robertson, "When I was convinced that there was a God, I danced on the Brig o' Dee with delight, though I had a fear that He would damn me. Atheism would have been better than the certainty of damnation, but there was not that (certainty)."

Pantheistic Atheism had only been a philosophy of desolation, darkness, and despair, and freedom from its awful bondage was a joyful deliverance. "But," as his biographer says, "Mr. Duncan's joy at this stage was, the JOY of an intellectual rather than a spiritual repose, a joy chequered by the vivid consciousness that he neither was nor at that time was willing to be, at peace with God... Hence, he had the fear that God would damn him!" From this time, we learn that for a period of nine years he was little troubled with theological difficulties, and concerned himself but little about his spiritual state. As to matters of faith, "he entrenched himself in a loose Sabellianism concerning the Trinity, untroubled by any questions about the Divinity of Christ, the Atonement, and other great doctrines of the Gospel."

The daily "round of teaching, reading, deep thinking, company, and attendance during the session at the Divinity Hall made up his life now for long years.". And yet this period was not unfruitful - very far from it. In fact, it was during those years that he acquired a large measure of that vast knowledge which he afterwards displayed of the classical and Oriental languages, of the literature of philosophy and theology, and of the poetry, history, and general literature of his own country. He became known among his fellow-students as one distinguished for his acquirements in classical literature.

During one of the sessions, he was prizeman for a Latin essay, and the Professor said that his was the only essay that was thought out in the language in which it was written. He also attached himself to some of the Highland students that he might acquire some, knowledge of Gaelic, and this he actually attained. Dr. Duncan came to the close of his divinity course in 1821, but for four years thereafter he hesitated to take license, unable as he then was honestly to subscribe the Westminster Confession of Faith.

At last, in 1825, he presented himself for license, not because he had changed his doctrinal views, but because he had changed his views of subscription to articles of faith, regarding them now only as peace articles, in subscribing which licentiates only pledge themselves not to preach against them. In looking back upon this step, he always spoke of it with abhorrence and grief. To Miss Robertson he said, less than a year before he died, "I took license in unbelief, in ungodliness, and in doctrinal unbelief and heresy." "How did they let you pass?" she asked. "Because I was a hypocrite," was his reply, "not willingly, for I kept back for long; but at last people were upon me, and out of

very shame I acted the hypocrite; I did not choose to tell others why I was not taking license."

The words contain a solemn message, I fear, to many who are entering the office of the ministry in the several Churches of today. He was licensed by the Presbytery to preach the Gospel on the 24th of June, 1825, and his first sermon was preached in the West Church, Aberdeen, from 1 John iii 1 - "Behold what manner of love the father hath bestowed upon us that we should be called the sons of God." He called it in later years a tremendously bad sermon, a sermon of the most artful theology that perhaps ever was spoken, explaining away every evangelical doctrine and phrase. Dr. Brown, who was present, reports that "apart from its vital defects, there was a calm, contemplative, high, half poetic, half-mystic strain about it, which had a most fascinating effect upon the hearer; accordingly, all was still attention, and a sort of wonder pervaded the audience."

BUT I must hasten on to notice the great change which took place in the character and life of this remarkable man. The instrument in the hand of God of that change was Dr. Cesar Malan, of Geneva, an eminent preacher of the everlasting Gospel. Malan, who was persecuted in Geneva for his faithful proclamation of the evangelical faith, paid his first visit to England and Scotland in the year 1822. He was gladly welcomed by all who loved the true gospel. In 1826 he came to this country for the first time as an expressed "missionary character," and it was while on this tour that he visited Aberdeen, and was the guest of a brother of Dr. Brown (Dr. Duncan's biographer).

Brown, who himself had but recently entered into gospel light and liberty, was intensely desirous to get Mr. Duncan to meet Malan with a view to spiritual benefit, and had two days beforehand long and intensely interesting conversations with Mr. Duncan on his soul's case, which undoubtedly prepared the way for his listening to Malan. Mr. Duncan came to the house of Dr. Brown's brother, among other guests, and had a long private conversation with Malan, who plied him with the text, "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God." It is impossible for me to give the details of this striking interview, but when Mr. Duncan happened to quote a text in the course of the conversation, Dr. Malan started forward and said, "See! you have the Word of God in your mouth," to which Mr. Duncan gave the memorable reply, "And may He not utterly take it out of my mouth."

Mr. Duncan said in later days that Malan's utterance "passed through him like a shock of electricity - the great thought that God meant man to know His mind; God - His Word - in my very mouth." "It was, I believe," he added, "the seed of perhaps all I have, if I have anything, to this hour." The proud scholar was completely changed, and became as a little child at the feet of Jesus. As he sat down to study a day or two after he "became suddenly (according to his own words) the passive recipient of all the truths he had heard and been taught from childhood. I sat there wondering for hours, and they came and preached themselves to me." And night, after night - God was now speaking home to his mind and heart the whole plan of salvation - he laid himself down to rest with the child's prayer on his lips, as the genuine outflow of his heart: -

"This night when I lie down to sleep,
I give my soul to Christ to keep;
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take."

Dr. Duncan's conversion - by the way like the Apostle Paul's and the great John Calvin's - was a sudden one, but it was none the less genuine on that account. Its suddenness and its thoroughness gave a vigorous proof of the almighty, wonderworking power of God, who can turn in a single moment the shadow of death into the morning. He saw revealed truth in a new light, and he began to walk with a tender conscience in the fear of God. The very temptation to daily sin was for the time being gone, and he contended for the truth in the person of Christ as God manifest in the flesh with an earnestness and zeal born of a new vision of the glory of God as revealed in His Son, treading with intense vehemence on his former views, which were practically Socinian and Unitarian. His reverence now for the Word of God, with all his natural suspicion of temperament, and keen critical powers, was profound in the extreme.

Dr. Moody Stuart bears testimony: - "More than any man I ever knew, he trusted every word, revered every word, and loved every word in the book of God." His preaching at this time took its colour from the teaching of his spiritual father, Dr. Malan. He insisted on an immediate faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as a personal Redeemer and Saviour, and without defining too particularly the nature of saving faith as the gift of God, he assured his hearers of their possession of acceptance with God and eternal life, if they but believed. He took a high line on the subject of the assurance and joy of faith,

and did not bring out sufficiently the place and necessity of the Holy Spirit's work.

Still, it was the time of his "first love," and while his preaching had its defects, not slight, yet coming as it did from one who was really anointed with the Spirit, it had its excellencies and its power, It may be mentioned here, by the way, that although the spiritual change in Mr. Duncan was complete and manifest, his special peculiarities of character remained.

His absentmindedness continued as a permanent feature. An amusing illustration of it is often repeated. He was walking to Maryculter, seven miles from Aberdeen, on a Sacramental Fast Day, to preach, and when he had gone a considerable way, he drew out his snuffbox to take a pinch. The wind being in his face he turned about to perform the operation; but when he accomplished this he did not turn round again; he moved on in the direction of Aberdeen, from which he had come, until eventually he was brought to his senses by the enquiry of a man who was going to the church at Maryculter, and who recognised him as the expected preacher for the day.

Two years after this time Mr. Duncan underwent a new experience which he was accustomed to describe as his "second conversion." His first spiritual joy had gradually ebbed away. The Lord's comfortable and powerful presence had been withdrawn. He found himself preaching a faith and assurance of which he had no inward conscious experience. Hitherto overlooking to a large extent, the deceitfulness and wickedness of the heart, he now awakened to a new sense of the moral corruption within, and charged himself with wretched hypocrisy, "babbling," as he said, "but an assurance to which he himself was a stranger, deceiving himself and he feared, deceiving others too, "a mere sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.

He passed through a severe and protracted conflict, in which he went down to the bottoms of the mountains, in his soul's exercise, condemning himself, and imploring the Lord's mercy, On one occasion, when outside in distress, he ran into certain brick kilns that were near, went down on his knees and prayed thus: "O Lord, I have broken thy law, and I have not believed in thy Son, and I have refused thy Holy Spirit; and if thou shouldest now cast me into hell, all holy beings would say, 'Righteous art thou, o Lord, when thou judgest.' But, Lord, for thy mercy's sake, give me thy Holy Spirit, that I may believe in thy Son." He was deeply taught at this time the holiness of God's law, the exceeding sinfulness of sin, the justice of the sentence of eternal death, the

sovereignty of God in bestowing salvation through Christ, and the necessity of the Holy Spirit's work to the production of saving faith and all other Christian graces - truths that he was familiar with and in agreement with before, but which were now made real and powerful in his personal experience by a special discipline of the Divine Spirit.

He was thus more fully qualified - qualified to a degree, to say the least, not excelled by any in his generation - to speak to his fellow sinners and to the household of faith of the depths and heights of the, redemption which was finished upon the cross, and of the love and other perfections of a Triune God as therein gloriously manifested, as well as of the trials, temptations, and comforts of God's people in their journey to the land of eternal light and blessedness.

As to his messengers of help in this trying but blessed period, he acknowledges special indebtedness to the Rev. Gavin Parker, Dr. Kidd, and the writings of Dr. Love, Dr. Owen, and Herman Witsius, the Dutch divine. Mr. Parker, who was a disciple of Dr. Love, was a gospel minister of great solidity and weight, whose labours were much crowned of the Lord, and his teaching at this time more than that of any other on the great subjects of sin and grace was blessed to Mr. Duncan.

Mr. Duncan's preaching engagements now increased, and through a series of providences, which need not be presently detailed, he was chosen in 1830 minister of the Chapel of Ease at Persie, in the parish of Bendochy, situated towards the eastern boundary of Perthshire (a chapel, by the way, that was at one time ministered to by the Rev. Mr. Shaw, afterwards of Bracadale in Skye). Here he laboured (without ordination) for a period of ten months, and proved himself not only a profound preacher of the gospel, but a faithful witness against sin in every form Sabbath desecration, promiscuous dancing, and other evils.

At the close of one of his services, where he had preached with great originality and power, two strangers from a distance met and talked on the sermon they had heard. One of them said, "What did you think of Mr. Duncan's sermon to-day?" The other replied in the words of Proverbs xxxi. 29: "Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all." His stay in Persie was short. Through the influence of Mr. Hugh Mackay, "a most estimable Glasgow gentleman," who heard him and was "profoundly impressed with the spirituality and depth of his ministrations," he was brought

in 1831 to Glasgow as an assistant to the Rev. Robert Clark, A.M., minister of Duke Street Gaelic Chapel (afterwards of Kinlochbervie, Sutherlandshire). Mr. Duncan's special work was to deliver an English lecture every Sabbath afternoon.

He also delivered a week-night lecture. His preaching was much followed by those persons who hungered for "the deeper and richer things" of God's Word, and their number at length so increased that it was resolved to make an effort to have him settled in a congregation of his own. A Church-Building Association had been started in Glasgow at the time, and on certain conditions the association consented to make a grant so as to enable Mr. Duncan's people to proceed with the erection of a place of worship. The site chosen was in the district of the Cowcaddens, but before the building was erected Mr. Duncan was ordained on the 28th April, 1836, as minister of what was to be known as the Milton Parish congregation. He was introduced to his new pastoral charge by Mr. (afterwards Dr.) Macdonald of Ferintosh, "the Apostle of the North." Here he ministered for upwards of four years to the great edification of hearers who hungered for the bread of life.

Among his eminent contemporaries in the pulpit, at this period was the late Rev. J. R. Anderson, who had begun his useful and honoured ministry in Kirkfield Chapel, and Mr. Duncan and he highly esteemed one another in the Lord. Early in the year 1837 Mr. Duncan was married to Miss Janet Tower, of Aberdeen, one of Mr. Parker's devoted hearers, and an excellent Christian lady, who proven a helpmeet in every sense of the word to her husband. Their first-born child (born 10th March, 1838) was a daughter, who was named Annie, Mr. Macdonald of Ferintosh officiating at the baptism. But their married life-together was short, for Mrs. Duncan passed away in the spring of 1839, a week after the premature birth of a second child, also a daughter, who did not survive.

Our godly divine thus passed through still further sore and trying experiences which undoubtedly contributed more and more to make him a son of consolation to the flock of Christ, and to deserve for himself the encomium which an old worthy woman in Glasgow (Judith Jack), who was one of his hearers, passed upon him to the speaker, "Oh, he was rale merciful!" During this period, he took his share in several courses of lectures on Protestantism, the Ten Commandments, and the Jews - which were delivered by ministers of the Established Church. One of these lectures, entitled "*The Work of the Holy*

Spirit in connection with the Conversion of the Jews is a truly noble production, full of genius, massive doctrine, and solemn, wise affectionate appeal to the Jewish people.

In the year 1838 there was the dawn of a new era in the history of Mr. Duncan, which led to the dissolution of his tie with the Milton Church. Much interest had arisen in the Church of Scotland on the subject of the conversion of the Jews, and Mr. Duncan was appointed a member of the Glasgow Jewish Committee. The issue was that he formally offered his services as an agent of the Church, either at home or abroad, for the promotion of Christianity among the Jews. This offer was cordially accepted.

Shortly thereafter a vacancy occurred in the Hebrew Chair of Glasgow University, and with the permission of the Committee Mr. Duncan sent a letter of application to the University authorities, and a remarkable letter it was. At the end of a lengthened statement of his varied and vast attainments in Oriental learning, he wrote: "In conclusion, with the exception of Cabbalistic works, which are exceedingly abstruse, and require deep study, I profess all Hebrew and I would most willingly present myself, along with any other, for competitive examination, by any man throughout the world, whether Christian or Jew." Though a more profound scholar in the field described could not be found, he was unsuccessful. Still his application brought him into notice so remarkably that his Alma Mater, the University of Aberdeen, conferred on him the degree of LL.D. as a mark of respect for his outstanding linguistic attainments.

This year, 1839, was also signalled by the departure of a famous deputation from the Church of Scotland to the Continent for the purpose of collecting information respecting the Jews. The members of it were Revs. Drs. Black and Keith, R. M. MacCheyne, and A. A. Bonar. They went as far as the Holy Land, and were absent seven months. Their report gave rise to much discussion and prayer as to when the first mission could be started. It was ultimately agreed in 1840 that the first mission should be planted in Moldavia, to be followed by another at Pesth, the capital of Hungary, in which places there were a large number of Jews. Dr. Duncan was appointed to go to Pesth.

The pastoral tie was dissolved in October, 1840, but he continued to officiate in the Milton Church on the Sabbaths, while during the week he spent the winter between Edinburgh and Glasgow, conducting Hebrew classes, and superintending the studies of the aspirants to mission work among the Jews.

He was married the second time in the spring of 1841 to a lady of excellent qualities. Here a story of his absence of mind may be related. On the day of the marriage his niece sent him upstairs to dress for the ceremony. Undressing was associated in his mind with going to bed. The cab came to take him away, but there was no sign of the dressed bridegroom. His niece went upstairs and found him fast asleep in bed, with a Hebrew book in his hand. In the month of May he was finally set apart to his new office in St. George's Church, Glasgow, and only four weeks after a party consisting of Dr. Duncan, his wife, Mrs Torrance, an officer's widow, and her daughter by a first marriage, and his own, still a child, as well as two young missionaries (Messrs. Smith and Allan), set out for the appointed field, where they safely arrived in the month of August. I regret that in the limited time at my disposal I can only notice in a few sentences this short but spiritually romantic period in the history of Dr. Duncan. My hearers must read the Memoirs for themselves, if they have not already done so.

He was only in Pesth for two years, but it was a time of crowded activity and precious fruitfulness. What a combination of providential circumstances had led to the inception of this Mission! The deputation referred to already were advised by their committee not to waste time by visiting Austria, as it was reckoned a hopeless field for a Protestant mission, but an accident befalling Dr. Black in the Egyptian desert it was found necessary that he and Dr. Keith should separate from their two junior brethren and return homeward by the Danube. They came to Pesth. Dr. Keith took seriously ill in a hotel there. The Archduchess of Hungary, a noble and pious lady of the Protestant faith, heard of his illness, and sent immediate orders that everything possible should be done for him. He was restored from the very point of death.

The Archduchess had been long praying that God would send His true gospel to Pesth, and she had premonitions for a fortnight before she heard of Dr. Keith's illness that something was to happen to her. She had long conversations with him, and when she learnt his earnest desire that a mission to the Jews would be started, she assured him that should the Church of Scotland plant a mission there she would place her own person between it and whatever danger might assail it. It was to this scene that Dr. Duncan came with his assistants, and the Lord blessed his labours to the conversion of not a few, such as the well-known family of Saphirs and others, who became notable witnesses for Christ.

The mission also exercised a most beneficent influence upon a variety of classes besides the Jews, Protestants, and Roman Catholics; learned and unlearned. Dr. Duncan and his family had a short change for health reasons in the winter and spring (1842-43) to Leghorn in Italy; they returned in June, 1843. In the course of their return journey they got a copy of the Witness newspaper containing an account of the Disruption, which they read with deep interest and sympathy.

The Disruption of 1843 made many changes. Two of the Divinity Professors, Drs. Chalmers and Welsh, came out, and were at once recognised in their respective offices in the Free Church of Scotland. The Professor of Hebrew and Oriental Languages adhered to the Establishment, and so a new professor was required. When the news came that Dr. Duncan and all the other missionaries of the Church of Scotland had adhered to the Free Church, the Education Committee unanimously elected Dr. Duncan to the Hebrew Chair, and the appointment was finally confirmed by the General Assembly which met at Glasgow in the autumn. He accepted the office, and arrived in Scotland at the beginning of November, when he had immediately to begin his professorial work.

This important position he occupied for the remaining twenty-seven years of his life with untold benefit to his students. It certainly cannot be said, however, that he was a success in systematically drilling the students in the elements of the language, in its grammatical structure, peculiarities, and niceties. Not but he had all these things at his finger ends, and was capable of doing so, if he only could methodically concentrate his mind in such rudimentary work. But he was defective in orderly method, and so students who were not themselves enthusiastic in the study of Hebrew suffered in their acquisition of a knowledge of the language.

On the other hand, he was admirably qualified (as one of his students bore testimony) to handle the exegesis of Scripture, especially that of the Old Testament, and in this department his vast learning, his still more remarkable powers of thought, and, above all, the profound reaches of his spiritual experience, made him a rare master. Moreover, the students had before their eyes daily a man of the most powerful and penetrating intellect and prodigious learning, who was naturally of a sceptical turn of mind, and who had lived at one time, as he said himself, in almost all the heresies, expounding the Scriptures with profound loyalty and reverence, walking in the fear of God and

the faith of Jesus Christ, trembling and alive to his personal relationship with the Lord, and seeking above everything else the experimental enjoyment of divine favour and fellowship.

Sometimes he was treading the dark valley of desertion, at other times rejoicing in the light, and when his soul was come into deep waters, such was his profound humility and open frankness of disposition that he did not hesitate to ask his students in the class, or as he met them going in and out, to pray for him, or to put the question whether they had a word from the Lord for him. His prayers, further, were remarkable, and constituted an intellectual, doctrinal, and spiritual education in themselves. He frequently forgot himself in the exercise, and the prayer, occupied nearly the whole of the class hour, while on more than one occasion it was the bell at the end of the hour that awoke him to the fact that he had gone entirely beyond the limits. But one must not think from these circumstances that he was entirely oblivious to the technical details of his work.

Sometimes, indeed, a student allowed this idea to take possession of him, and grossly neglected his preparations, but he discerned, perhaps, before the class hour was over that this was far from a safe policy. On one occasion a student who made a shameful exhibition of ignorance of the simplest elements of Hebrew in the class received the following unexpected but scathing rebuke: "I trust, sir, for the honour of Christianity, that you will never meet with an unconverted Jew." This was as if a thunderbolt had suddenly crashed down upon the class, and made the most careless feel that their professor, with all his apparent obliviousness and patience, was not to be trifled with. He had also a keen sense of humour, though it was not always apparent from the seriousness and gravity of his demeanour.

An amusing illustration of this occurred one day. The students were reading in the 22nd chapter of Numbers, the story of Balaam. One of them was found very deficient in the nicer details of the Hebrew, and Dr. Duncan almost lost his temper with him. At last, in despair, he said to the student, "Well, read on," and the very first words that he came to were, "And the ass said unto Balaam, Am I not thine ass?" The scene was truly ludicrous, and the Professor broke out into a loud burst of laughter, in which the class joined. But no sooner was the explosion over than the sensitive conscience of Dr. Duncan smote him. "A cloud passed over his face, and his eyes filled with tears while he confessed to the class that he had done wrong and set a bad example. He said that no one

should ever laugh over the Word of Jehovah, and that he especially, a Professor of the Old Testament Scriptures, should have been the last to do so.” (See Life by. Dr. Brown.)

As time wore on, Dr. Duncan had assistance in his class teaching, which relieved him largely of the kind of work he was least fitted for, and latterly, owing to the infirmities of age, a colleague and successor (Rev. A. B. Davidson), who undertook all the elementary instruction. He was able himself, however, to do his own part till a few weeks before his death.

During this long and closing period of his career he was frequently a member of the Assembly, and took part in its deliberations. His most impressive appearances were in connection with the Jewish Missions Day, when he delivered addresses of remarkable elevation and enthusiasm, still on record in the Assembly blue-books. The question of Union with the United Presbyterian Church was also started in his time. Dr. Duncan, though a lover of the image of Christ, no matter where he saw it, was a conscientious and ardent opponent of the Union movement: - he viewed what is called Voluntaryism with the greatest dread, as through its lack of acknowledging sufficiently God and Christ in the affairs of the State having a tendency to Atheism - and he would have made any sacrifice rather than enter the proposed United Church.

There was one sphere of service outside his ordinary work during this time in which his labours were of the highest spiritual value and usefulness, that is, in assisting ministers in the pulpit at Communion and other seasons. For many years he assisted Dr. Moody Stuart in Free St. Luke's, and latterly Dr. Horatius Bonar in the Grange Free Church. The Great Day will only declare the amount of spiritual benefit which godly and exercised souls derived from his profoundly illuminating and comforting discourses. Some such followed him wherever he went, and drank in “the living water” with rare satisfaction and delight. He was a nonesuch as a messenger of Christ in their esteem, and they could not get enough from his heaven-taught lips.

It may interest some of my audience to learn what the late Dr. Kennedy of Dingwall - himself a master of assemblies in the work of proclaiming the glorious Gospel - thought of Dr. Duncan's preaching. A friend asked Dr. Kennedy on one occasion if he had ever heard Dr. Duncan preach. “Yes,” he replied, “On two occasions. When I was a student at Aberdeen I won a money bursary, and at the close of the session I went to Glasgow, sight-seeing, and having been informed that he was preaching one week evening I went to

Milton Church to hear him. The building was fairly large, but the congregation small and scattered. The light was not very good, but the brilliance of the sermon in close reasoning and soul-stirring power, I'll never forget: On another occasion (he said) I was assisting Dr. Begg at the Communion season in Edinburgh, and Dr. Moody Stuart invited me to take the Friday-evening service at Free St. Luke's, which I would have done, but for the closing remark in his letter, saying that otherwise he would have to fall back upon Dr. Duncan. My reply was, 'Great is your privilege in having such a one to fall back upon; I'll not be coming to preach.' Then (added Dr. Kennedy) when I estimated Dr. Duncan had got under way with the service I stole quietly into the church, and heard a sermon that did not seem to have been prepared on earth, but felt as if one of the old prophets had come from within the veil to tell us what was going on there. Nothing more heavenly did I ever hear from human lips."

Dr. Duncan's labours were owned of God, both to the conversion of sinners and to the edification of the saints, particularly to the latter. Apart from a large number of godly people in general there was one notable instance, of a public servant of Christ, the Rev. William C. Burns, the eminent evangelist and devoted missionary, whose preaching was signally blessed to hundreds, if not thousands, of persons about the Disruption time in Scotland and elsewhere. During his divinity studies in Glasgow, especially the last two years of them (1838-39), Mr. Burns attended closely on the ministry of Mr. Duncan's the Milton Church, and obtained, as biographers tell us, "Deeper views of divine truth and more solemn aspects of the Christian calling and discipleship than he had known before." "Every Sabbath spent by him in Milton Church" was as "a day in Patmos", and every sermon almost as an opening of the gate of heaven." (Life of Rev. W. C. Burns, p. 38.)

Mr. Burns at an after time bore testimony at a large meeting of those who had benefited by his ministrations at Perth, as follows: "If you have got any good from me, you owe it all to that remarkable man of God, Dr. Duncan, of Edinburgh. I have just taught you what he has taught me." He added, "When leaving Edinburgh I asked him, 'What advice will you give me'" He answered, "Take you care of His Church, and He will take care of your interests; look after His glory, and He will look after your comfort." (Dr. Moody Stuart's Recollections, pp. 52, 53.)

Dr. Duncan, after a few weeks' illness, entered his rest on the morning of the 26th February, 1870, at the age of 74 years. His remains were buried in the

Grange Cemetery amid a large concourse of mourners, professors and ministers, students and the general public. An obelisk of granite was erected on his grave by his daughter Maria (Mrs. Spaeth), and it bears the following inscription, admirable both for the truth and modesty of its terms: - "In memory of the Rev. John Duncan, LL.D., Professor of Hebrew and Oriental Languages in the Free Church College, Edinburgh. An Eminent Scholar and Metaphysician. A Profound Theologian. A man of tender piety, and of a lively and loving spirit. Born, 1796. Died, 1870."

I have given only the barest outline of the life and character of one of the brightest Christian ornaments that the Church of Christ in Scotland had in modern times, and must express regret for my very imperfect effort. One of his friends said, "He seemed to be a child and a giant, in one - both characters curiously intermingled, making intercourse with him peculiarly delightful. No man ever inspired less awe, nor called forth deeper reverence." And Dr. Moody Stuart, commenting on his death, makes the fitting and beautiful remark: "It seemed to be as if in the company of the blessed receiving him into the everlasting habitations, the enquiry might be made, 'Who is this that cometh up from the wilderness, leaning upon the Beloved?' and that they might be answered with the reply, This is he who, when bidden to the marriage feast, went and sat down in the lowest room." "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord: yea, saith the Spirit, they rest from their labours and their works do follow them."