

An appreciation of the role of prayer in the ministry of Alexander Moody Stuart (1809-1898).

‘A man of prayer’ is a title that any minister or preacher would love to be applied to his life and ministry. This is the bold and unashamed title from a son’s biography of his minister father not long after his death in 1898. Writing with the intimate knowledge of a son, Kenneth Moody Stuart draws on the testimony of family, colleagues and friends to his father, A. Moody Stewart. He opens, a most illuminating chapter with these words: “Dr Moody Stuart was pre-eminently a man of prayer. He assiduously cultivated private prayer. His prayers in the family were no mere formal acts of worship; they were very solemn, very earnest, realising the presence of the Great God, and making others realise it also; yet in their pleadings, they almost amounted to a holy familiarity with God.”¹

There are many books and articles that can challenge and probe us in this most personal of areas – an area that in the end is known only to God and ourselves. This is not designed to be yet another exercise of hitting ourselves over the head, or beating ourselves up by comparing ourselves with a super-saint from yester-year. Here is pattern, right attitude, positive successful methodology – and above all an encouragement to seek to have a real vibrant passion to be real with our Lord God Almighty – and particularly in the realm of our prayer life.

So who is Alexander Moody Stuart? He was one of the first generation of Free Church of Scotland ministers, who was born in 1809. He had successfully founded and maintained Free St Luke’s Church in Edinburgh. There he not only served his congregation, but also was an exemplar of good practice for evangelical ministry.² As John Macleod notes: “He was an expert in case divinity and the experimental and searching element entered largely

into his message. Yet, though it was prominent, it did not displace the more directly Evangelical note. He may be taken as a specimen of the most studious type of the old cultured gospel ministers. With his yoke fellows in the Evangel, men of like mind, John Macrae and Charles Mackintosh, he was wont to spend one day each month in private brotherly conference and prayer. When trouble arose in connection with the case of Robertson Smith he showed his quality as a student of the questions in debate as fully as any that took part in the discussions. But this critical interest was for him only a thing that came in by the way.”³ He was Moderator of the Free Church of Scotland Assembly in 1875, and died in 1898.

His son said that, “Prayer was to him a second nature.”⁴ He characterised his father’s style in prayer as ‘Pleading Praying’. “He often seemed to wrestle in prayer, like Jacob at Peniel, saying, ‘I will not let Thee go, except Thou bless me.’ This was manifest also in his prayers in public, from which some worshippers said that they derived more spiritual help even than from his sermons. Of him it might truly be said that he prayed ‘without ceasing’; that he ‘prayed always, with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, watching thereunto with all perseverance.’ He felt that nothing was too small for him to bring to his God in prayer, and that nothing was too great for him to ask in Jesus’ name.”⁵ Moreover, his son writes, “There was often holy urgency and importunity in his pleading, there was no lack of submission to the divine will, or of patience when his request was deferred, or in some cases denied ... he was urgent and importunate in praying for temporal blessings for those dear to him, much more than for himself, he was still more urgent and importunate in his supplications for spiritual blessings both for himself and others. Delay in granting these did seem sometimes to

affect with holy impatience.”⁶ He son says that his father sought to practise patience like Job, and quotes some insightful words of his father from his own reflections on the patience of Job, such as: “It was not the patience of indifference – no man ever felt bereavement more keenly than Job did; it was not the patience of stupidity – his was one of the greatest intellects that has been in the world. And it was not the patience of timidity – he said, ‘I brake the jaws of the wicked and plucked the spoil out of his teeth.’ It was the patience of submission to the holy sovereignty of God, of knowing that God could do no wrong that God is good, and that everything that comes from His hand must be good. Grand old hero, formed by God’s own hand! How blessed to be a man when a man through grace is capable of such patience as that!”⁷

Moody Stuart sought to respond readily to any request for prayer, and most often he would take the initiative in seeking to bring a person or a situation to his ‘Holy Father’ or ‘Heavenly Father’. He expected answers and his son gives a number of instances where people testified to receiving the benefits of Moody Stuart’s prayers for them. Among them were his anxious prayers for two of his sons who had gone to skate, one winter, on a less popular local frozen lake.⁸ There was danger as there was no boat, ladder, or ropes provided. “All that day my father had a strong impression that his boys were in danger, and was engaged constantly in prayer for them. Opening his study door whenever a bell rang, to see if they had returned, and much disappointed when he never heard their voices in the lobby, he returned always to prayer ... at last a bell rang and he heard their longed for voices, and on asking if they were all well, they called upstairs, ‘Yes; but a boy has been drowned’ ... What is remarkable is that Andrew said that he felt an almost irresistible impulse to plunge in, not reflecting that he would

only have been another victim, and was restrained by feeling something like a strong hand pressing him back.”⁹

He son further recalls, that his father would never read or study the Scriptures in public, or with the family, or even in private “without lifting up his heart and voice in prayer for a blessing on it”. So important and vital was this attitude that, “One day in his last illness, when he seemed to be unconscious, I opened the Bible and began to read a few verses aloud, when he suddenly said, ‘Oh don’t begin to read without prayer!’”¹⁰ Have we come to treat the Scriptures in such a utilitarian way that in a real sense we have not revered the Bible as the Words of the Living God to us?

He was concerned for reality in praying: “Praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.”¹² He had three directions that he invariably gave to encourage reality in praying:

1. “Pray *till* you pray.
2. Pray till you are conscious of being heard.
3. Pray till you have received an answer.”

Moody Stuart had an appetite for seeing the power of God display in fruitful gospel effective ways in ‘Revivals’. Perhaps this is one of those areas where we might seem most detached from those nineteenth century days, and the experiences of Moody Stuart in particular. Certainly he lived through days when there were touches of Revival being experienced in Scotland and here Moody Stuart was an encourager, by prayer and concern, for such times to happen more often. There are distinct times in his own life when he witnessed significant numbers of folk becoming vibrant Christians.

1. In his early years, having been licensed as a preacher/missioner in October 1831, he went as a Home Missioner to Lindisfarne, Holy Island, off the

Northumberland coast. There the young Moody Stuart laboured for two years, ministering to the seafaring folk, staying at his post through an outbreak of plague, and overcoming hardened prejudices against taking the gospel seriously – gaining many notable successes. His son cites a testimony to his father’s work at the time: “There was a peculiar power in your father, exactly meeting one’s needs, in his preaching. We often said coming home ‘Mr M S might have heard what we were speaking about last night.’ He seemed so to meet a felt need; I am sure he was directed by the Lord what to say.”¹³

2. Moody Stuart had his part in both the Revival and the Disruption of the early 1840s. His church, St Luke’s was frequently used for the initial Assembly Meetings of the young Free Church and also for Revival Meetings. His son cites a friend’s testimony: “Mr Moody Stuart was the last survivor of the foremost group of the Disruption period who belonged less to the statesmanlike leaders who were the administrators of the Free Church in her early struggles, than to that cluster of pietistic order, who not less than the others attracted to the Free Church all that was best in Scotland in these memorable days, and of whom McCheyne was the first to be removed as your father was the last.”¹⁴

3. During the Revival of 1859 he, not only visited Ireland, but encouraged Brownlow North, an evangelist, who was outstandingly used at the time. Free Church St Luke’s became a popular venue: “Winter after winter following on his visit to Edinburgh in 1857, Mr North preached in Free St Luke’s Church, and made the means of blessing to many souls within its walls ... the church, located in the central situation in the new town, and seating, when all the galleries are thrown open, nearly 1,500 people, was peculiarly well adapted for such audiences as Mr North attracted to it; while

the fact that the congregation contained a large number of very devoted and experienced Christian people, who gave themselves to earnest wrestling with the great Master of assemblies for a blessing on the word published by His servant, furnishes a key to explain the abundant blessing which descended this place of worship.”¹⁵

Moody Stuart said, about those times, “At that first visit in Edinburgh we both engaged in prayer, and alike in prayer and in conversation it was impossible not to be deeply impressed with his reverential awe, his earnestness, and his tenderness of spirit ... To myself it was unspeakably refreshing to find a man with such fear of the living God, such brokenness of spirit, and such faith in the everlasting Word.”¹⁶

For several weeks Moody Stewart visited Ferryden, a fishing port, near Montrose, where there was an outbreak of revival. He was also eager to visit other centres: “From his own experience, and his deep interest in such revival movements, his services were naturally in request from many quarters, but the limits of his strength, and the constant claims of a city charge, prevented him from acceding to these to a great extent ... He prayed much both in public and in the family for seasons of revival, and constantly stirred up others to pray and labour for this, being fully aware of the general apathy in regard to it.”¹⁷

4. For Moody Stuart seeking for revival blessing was to pray for an increase of the work of the Holy Spirit, “In his preaching, as in all his ministerial work and his personal religion, [he gave] great prominence ... to the work of the Holy Spirit. This was not only felt to be deepest, but was also uppermost and foremost in his whole religious life. He ever realised for himself his absolute need of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit to make the word of God, whether read or preached, effectual, and he let others see clearly that he realised this. In

every service he prayed for the breathings of God's Spirit. "Awaken, O North Wind; and come, thou South; and blow upon my garden that the spices thereof may flow out."¹⁸

5. Moody Stuart reminds us of something that is a vital part of the Church's hope and experience: "When the Spirit so works in the hearts of many there is a revival of religion, and nothing else is a revival ... at such a time the Holy Ghost is peculiarly present with his people and powerfully striving with sinners. He takes his residence among men, and makes many living temples to himself. He enables many to pray, and he is found even of them that have not sought him ... in a time of much prayer on the part of others, have you not often recognised the special presence of the Spirit with yourself? In seasons such as that of your communion, when thousands are continuing in prayer and supplication, believers in other parts of the country, at the very moment of your solemnities, have unexpectedly found such access in Christ to the Father by the Spirit ... What does this prove? Not merely that the separate prayers of separate persons are heard for themselves, but that there are outpourings of supplication which bring the Spirit himself near to the land, revealing the Lamb of God."¹⁹

6. Moody Stuart took part in Prayer Union meetings. One such was reported on February 10 1867, which listened to accounts of revival movements in Tullibody, Torphichen, Larbert, and Dunipace, and then, "Earnest prayer was offered for all these places, and for the congregations of those present, and suggestions were made as to the mode of preaching most likely to be blessed to effect this end, and the most approved methods of conducting such spiritual movements. Increased prayerfulness on the part of the ministers and congregations was specially recommended, and it was suggested that

ministers might exchange pulpits occasionally with the express purpose of preaching to the unconverted."²⁰

Moody Stuart simply loved to associate himself with praying people, and to unite with them in presenting their common petitions at the throne of grace. He had a weekly prayer meeting for students at his house in Edinburgh in 1836, but he was concerned that colleagues in ministry knew fellowship and stimulus to maintain their personal sense of reality in their praying. "For many years a prayer-meeting of ministerial brethren was held in Free St Luke's manse each alternate Monday morning. One of those who attended it some time after its commencement, the Rev J Morgan of Viewforth, speaks of it as having proved 'a great spiritual force'. He writes: 'The study in 43 Queen Street was familiar and almost sacred. I can vividly recall that quiet face, with its firm, square brow and strong-set mouth and chin, both hands grasping his thick well-worn interleaved Bible. His plaintive winsome voice in prayer and intercession was most impressive. To some of us these Monday forenoon meetings for devotion, conference and study of the Word, were unspeakably precious and profitable, and are a dear remembrance still.'"²¹ Moody Stuart knew that he could not preach or exhort his people about prayer if he was not seeking to be a living example of the devotion, commitment and importunate concern that all the people of God should have, simply by being the Lord's privileged people.

For Moody Stuart, ministerial usefulness and effectiveness was bound up with the duty and responsibility of prayerfulness. This was something that was underlined in his life from practice and experience. In addressing his colleagues at a conference, he simply exposed what is on his own heart for himself and for them: "The impressibleness

of our people on the Sabbath depends much on prayer through the week; and their praying for us and for themselves depends much on our praying for them. And then on the Sabbath how much hangs, not merely on the words that are spoken, but on the spirit in which we preach and pray. Especially in extemporary prayer, we are in constant danger of sinking into a formality perhaps more lifeless than if we were using a form; a formality which we must all have detected in ourselves, by falling into the groove of the same words for want of fresh life within. Or if in such a state we make an effort at the moment toward real prayer, the prayer is constrained and laboured, instead of the spontaneous utterance of our thoughts. When the mouth speaks out of the abundance of the heart – out of spiritual desire, spiritual sorrow, or spiritual joy, what conciseness – what tenderness, what power is in the supplication, taking the people along with us in all our petitions, or else making them to feel their own lack of the spirit of grace. This one ordinance in our Church of public prayer without a form of words, shuts us up to a very peculiar necessity of becoming and continuing to be men of prayer; shuts us up under the pressure a severe penalty, resting on ourselves and on our people week by week, as the sure consequence of our failure.”²²

He was frequently asked to write the ‘Call to Prayer’ in preparation for an Assembly Meeting of his Church [The Free Church of Scotland], and he entered into the responsibility of the call himself. Moody Stuart knew, as surely we all do, that prayer is one area that exposes the hypocrisy of our hearts; it is always much easier to write about than to do!

“Through all his life it could be truly said of him that like the Apostles he ‘gave himself continually to prayer’. Many letters have come from friends stating that before they parted from him after a call he always joined with them in prayer. When any of

his family started on a journey his last farewell was a loving commendatory prayer, and it was noticed by them that none of those thus commended to the Divine protection ever encountered the smallest accident of any kind in their journeys.”²³ Colleagues, particularly assistants, who worked with him quickly, saw the shape of his life and the attitude of his heart. One of them wrote: “He was a man of prayer. If we were engaged in any work in his study and it did not progress as desired he stopped for prayer. All his work, and specially his difficulties, were brought to God in prayer.”²⁴

Kenneth Moody Stuart ended his chapter, reflecting on his father’s life of prayer, by giving some notes from his father on the subject of ‘importunity in prayer’. The Scripture that Moody Stuart was expounding was the Parable in which the friend came at midnight and implored some bread to give to an unexpected visitor:

“Prayer is *a sense of need*: a need which is *entire* and *ascertained*. The suppliant must first *know that he has nothing*, but is poor and needy. He must be sure of this, and make it a settled point, and not merely suspect it. There is a great difference between suspected and ascertained want ... The suppliant’s need must be *urgent*, requiring immediate assistance whether for himself or for others. Christ puts a case in which the man requiring bread could not wait till tomorrow.”

“Next *the suppliant must have confidence in Christ as being willing to grant his request* ... sometimes men are ready to say, Christ can give, but he has no will. Oh, what blasphemy! How amazing that God has endured His people when they have brought up such an evil report against Him! Oh, dear brethren, it is this that hinders prayer, and success in prayer, when we say, ‘He has no mind to give us what we ask.’”

“Next, *perseverance in asking* is needful. *The first knock has obtained nothing*; it seems to have produced no result, but the man continues knocking. *Many knocks have produced no effect*, but these knocks have troubled the possessor of the bread ... the difficulty becomes the greater, the longer we continue knocking; for if we are not to go without it, we must make louder and more continual knocking. I must either go away, and give up, or seek with such vehemence as must obtain it, as if a greater effort than ever were needed and must be made. And it must be so with us, seeing how dreadful it is to perish. I cannot perish! Or in interceding for others, ‘How can I bear to see the destruction of my people? Therefore let me seek until I find.’ Jesus says, ‘Every one that asks receives’. Never was there a case to the contrary. Thousands of cases there have been when men have knocked and gone away; but there never was a case of a man who *sought to the end* and did not get.”

“We should not diminish the request, but increase the importunity. *There will be no counting of the loaves*. There is bread enough in our Father’s house and to spare; and, oh, there is want enough! Though God tarry, have large desires and expectations, but these come to nothing unless there be large faith and large requests. Let us, dear friends, ask much of our God, and keep asking much, because when He arises He will give an abundance.”²⁵

It could be argued that Moody Stuart belonged to the ‘Romantic Period’ of the history of the Christian Church in Britain, but it was also a period that saw great challenges to the structure, beliefs, the constitution of the Church and its basic beliefs. The scene in Scotland certainly had its own distinctiveness, but at the same time there are so many areas where Moody Stuart’s basic desire of wanting to be real with God – wanting to be true to the revelation of God’s truth in the Scriptures –

wanting God and His relationship with His people, be known, felt, and be displayed as fully as possible for the glory and delight of His people – find more than a vague echo in our 21st Century Christian experience. The area of prayer always has particular perennial concern, and Moody Stuart’s testimony has things that both challenge and encourage us all.

References

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