

Brief Biography of Duncan Campbell



[Duncan Campbell 1898 - 1972]

As an incentive to pray for revival, there could be few greater challenges than reading accounts of how God has graciously granted times of awakening in the past. A notable example of this can be seen in the life and ministry of Duncan Campbell who was so remarkably blessed and used by God in Scotland and many other places earlier in this century. In commending the study of his biography, Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones stated that, "in private conversation, as well as in his preaching, Duncan Campbell's emphasis was always on the Lordship and the power of the Holy Spirit". His chief desire was to see God powerfully at work in the lives of those around him and his whole life was devoted to that end after his own conversion as a teenage boy.

Duncan was a descendant of Captain John Campbell who commanded the troops that slaughtered the families of the MacDonald clan at Glencoe in 1692 for failing to swear allegiance to the government. He was born on 13 February 1898 which was the anniversary of the Glencoe massacre and by that time his family, which had owned lands near Inverary in Argyll, had suffered a decline in circumstances. This caused them to move to Benderloch on the mouth of Loch Etive, where they farmed rough land at Black Crofts. Duncan's father was Hugh Campbell, a stonemason, who had married Jane Livingstone from the nearby island of Lismore, and both his parents were converted in 1901 when two young women belonging to the Faith Mission visited their village. This Mission had been established in Glasgow in 1886 by John George Govan with the purpose of carrying out evangelistic work in the rural areas of Scotland and Ireland.

Duncan, who was the fifth of their ten children, was only three years old at the time of his parents' conversion, and, therefore, he had the benefits of a Christian upbringing from an early age. Family prayers, Bible reading and daily worship were regular features in their plain and simple home, despite the long hours of hard work by his parents. By nature, Duncan was a venturesome child who found the wild remote countryside around provided ample scope for his energies, but he had to take his share in the work of the family croft, fetching water, cutting peat and tending the animals, in addition to walking three miles each way to school.

On leaving school, Duncan started as a cattle herdsman on the nearby moors until he became an apprentice in a grocer's shop at Connell on the opposite shore of Loch Etive. After his lonely existence looking after the cattle, he now found wider horizons, with new friends and new interests, particularly Scottish folk music. Duncan soon became an accomplished piper and he was often in demand at concerts and dances where he enjoyed the colourful tartans and stirring music. It was on one such occasion in December 1913, while playing at a charity concert, that his thoughts turned from the hills of Scotland to the hill of Calvary and a deep sense of guilt swept over him. He suddenly became aware of the emptiness of his life and he felt so desolate and worthless that he was unable to continue playing. The chairman thought he was ill and when Duncan explained that it was conviction of sin that was troubling him, he was told he would soon get over it. But Duncan could not dismiss the thoughts from his mind and he left the concert in great turmoil of spirit. On his way home, Duncan met a friend to whom he confided his feelings and, to his surprise, his companion admitted that he too had been experiencing a similar conviction of sin. However, when they came to the parting of their ways, his friend stated he would put off making any decision until a later time. In contrast, Duncan could not let matters rest and told his friend, "I'm going home to get right with God tonight."

As he passed the hall at Alt na mara where he had attended Sunday School as a boy, he was puzzled to see the lights

on inside even though it was almost midnight. Listening at the door, he heard a voice which he recognised as his father's praying in a meeting led by Mary Graham and Jessie Mowat of the Faith Mission. When Duncan took a seat inside, Miss Graham began speaking on the text, "God speaketh once, yea twice, yet man perceiveth it not:", (Job 33:14), and his sense of conviction became so strong that he had to leave the hall. Several times as he walked home, he stopped to pray by the roadside, calling on God for mercy, and when he finally reached his cottage, he found his mother was also kneeling in prayer. She had been prevented from attending the Mission by the arrival of relatives who had just retired to bed, and as she prepared a place for Duncan to sleep on the kitchen floor, he told her about the spiritual turmoil he was experiencing. With typical understanding, his mother advised him to waste no time in making his peace with God and so he went into the barn and prayed in Gaelic, "Lord, I know not what to do, I know not how to come, but if You'll take me as I am, I'm coming now." As he was praying, his thoughts were filled by the promise of God contained in the words of Jesus, "He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life." (John 5:24). With the joy of salvation flooding his heart, Duncan hurried back to his mother and together they thanked God for His goodness and mercy.

The following day, Duncan met an old Sunday School teacher who had learned that he had been at the prayer meeting and he asked Duncan why he had walked out without accepting Christ. Duncan eagerly recounted to him the experiences of the previous evening, and as he did so he felt a glorious sense of assurance and he knew that from then onwards he wanted to devote his life to God's service. The first result of his conversion was to support wholeheartedly the work of the Faith Mission which was holding regular meetings in local cottages. Before long, Duncan had the joy of leading his own cousin to the Saviour, and another who was converted at these meetings was Shona Gray, a young girl, whose family had recently moved to Black Crofts and who was later to become Duncan's wife. However, within a few months, the 1st World War broke out in August 1914, and soon Duncan found himself caught up in its dreadful course.

Like most young men of his generation, Duncan was enlisted in the armed forces, and in his case he was trained as a machine-gunner in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and then sent to France. His regiment was involved in many battles, including the attack at Passchendaele in 1917 when massive casualties were suffered. The brutality of army life and the senseless slaughter on the battlefield sickened Duncan until he could hardly bear any more, and it was only his faith in Christ that sustained him through the horrors of those months. Eventually, he was transferred to the Cavalry Corps and took part in the battle of Amiens in April 1918 where he was seriously wounded. As he lay on the ground, he prepared to commit his soul into God's hands when he was struck by the hoof of a charging horse whose rider heard Duncan give a loud groan. After the attack, the rider returned to recover Duncan and carry him to safety in a Casualty Station. During the journey, Duncan believing himself to be dying, uttered M'Cheyne's prayer, "Lord, make me as holy as a saved sinner can be", and he was promptly aware of a sense of great power bearing him up. While being treated for his wounds, a nurse began to sing in Gaelic, "There is a fountain filled with blood", and Duncan responded by repeating Psalm 103 also in Gaelic. A strange stillness and peace came upon the whole Casualty Station and several of the wounded soldiers were deeply convicted of their sin and trusted in Christ. In his weakness, Duncan praised God for His wonderful goodness and felt an overwhelming desire to see His power displayed in such glorious acts of mercy.

After a period of convalescence in a military hospital at Perth, Duncan Campbell was demobilised from the army and he returned home to Black Crofts. As he recovered his strength, he became impatient to launch out on evangelism and before long he begun visiting the scattered villages of Argyllshire, stopping to read the Bible and pray in the homesteads along the way. His parents cherished the hope that he would enter the ministry and wanted him to undergo training, but Duncan felt unwilling to embark on a long period of study at college and he decided to apply to the Faith Mission which held intensive courses lasting nine months as preparation for Mission work. Under the watchful guidance of John George Govan, students were directed towards becoming effective witnesses and soul-winners, but Duncan's youthful energy and enthusiasm were not easily harnessed. His lack of formal education was all too apparent and he was also clearly more at ease speaking Gaelic than English, but nevertheless his chief desire was to testify what God had done for him to all he met. As a result, he had no hesitation in doing door-to-door visiting, distributing tracts and speaking at open air meetings on the streets of Edinburgh. His plain and direct manner of personal witnessing was a great advantage and he even had the joy of seeing some come to faith in Christ on these occasions.

When his course at the Training Home ended in 1920, Duncan was assigned to Northern Ireland and although he would have preferred to work among his fellow Scots, he threw himself into the task in his usual whole-hearted way.

He and a colleague started with evening meetings in a garage and then a school in County Antrim and, despite violent opposition, there were signs of God's blessing as conversions began to occur. However, Duncan's time in Ireland was cut short when he was transferred back to Scotland to conduct similar missions in the "Highlands and Islands". This was a calling close to his heart and Duncan set about it without delay. Starting on the Isle of Mull and moving through Argyll, he and a colleague would spend several weeks visiting homes in remote areas, getting to know the people and gaining their trust by helping them in practical every day tasks, as a prelude to the evangelistic campaigns which were held in any convenient building. The young men were fully prepared to meet with indifference and opposition and many nights were spent in prayer for the next day's work. Sometimes the meetings were crowded, but whether speaking to many or to few, Duncan and his usual companion, George Dunlop, preached with much boldness and to great effect in that conversions were frequent and recorded, and these even included people who were known in their localities as "hard" and "difficult" characters.

From Iona in the west to Fort William in the north, then back to Oban for the final open air meetings, the mission was so remarkably blessed that some reports were published of a spiritual awakening in Argyllshire in 1921. Thus encouraged to go on, Duncan continued this work for a further three years until he visited the isle of Skye in 1924. After initially meeting with a very hostile reception, the mission experienced such powerful movements of the Holy Spirit that people were saved not only in the preaching services, but also in houses and by the roadside where Duncan stopped to speak to them. However, the work was not without its cost and Duncan's health was seriously affected by his exertions, so that he was obliged to return to the Training Home in Edinburgh for recuperation.

While he was recovering, Duncan attended the Keswick Convention where he renewed his acquaintance with Shona Gray, the young lady to whom he had been so attracted more than ten years earlier. She had recently returned after several years working with the Algiers Mission Band, and the following year they were married in Glasgow. By this time Duncan had resigned from the Faith Mission and as a result he was free to accept an invitation to take charge of the United Free Church at Ardvassar on the isle of Skye where they spent their honeymoon. For the next four years he worked hard as Pastor to a widely scattered congregation in the south of the island, but in 1929 when proposals were made for a merger between the United Free Church and the Church of Scotland, Duncan disapproved of the scheme and therefore accepted a call to lead a small group of Christians at Balintore on the northern shore of the Moray Firth. Most of this congregation had been converted during Faith Mission meetings in 1921 and they preferred to form their own independent fellowship at the time of the merger.

At first they had only a dilapidated building for their meetings but there was a strong response to Duncan's faithful ministry and within two years they had built a new church and manse. His work amongst the young people at Balintore was particularly blessed in the ten years that he spent there, and he left behind a strong and well-established church in 1940 when he moved to Falkirk. Two years later, he was ordained as a minister of the United Free Church, but he found the industrial town to be hard ground, and although he worked with his usual zeal, the lack of response caused him to question his own spiritual condition. Because of his experiences during the missions in Argyll, Duncan had become well-known and had often been invited to speak at churches and conventions throughout Scotland and Ireland. However, he was no longer seeing fruit in his own ministry and questions began to assail his mind - had he allowed liberal teachings to tone down his preaching? Was he relying on his own strength and reputation? Was God casting him aside? At the same time, he was confronted by a choice of calls - either to another church at Arbroath, or to lecture at the Training Home of the Faith Mission. While in this state of uncertainty, Duncan attended a convention in Edinburgh and was challenged to plead with God, "Oh Lord, give me back the years that the locusts have eaten", and then, "Lord, make again Thy marred vessel". He knew that there was only one way to resolve the issue and on returning home he gave himself to waiting upon God in prayer. During the night, his doubts and fears were at last removed as he recalled the glorious promises in God's words, "For the Lord will not cast off His people, neither will He forsake His inheritance" (Psalm 94:13), and "Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; Who healeth all thy diseases" (Psalm 103:3). With this reassurance filling his heart, Duncan found himself deeply burdened for the people of the "Highlands and Islands" and he knew that God was calling him back to the work of evangelism that had been so blessed earlier in his life.

Thus it was that in January 1949 Duncan and his wife and family, now numbering five children, moved to Edinburgh where the Faith Mission had provided a house as his base for mission work. He started once more on Skye before moving to the Highlands, and he was soon able to report, "I am again fighting the old battle I fought twenty five years

ago, but enjoying it on the victory side", as the power of the gospel was at work in many hearts. Duncan would have been content to continue with this work and in fact he was making arrangements for another visit to Skye, when he received an invitation to lead a mission at the village of Barvas on the isle of Lewis. Spiritual awakenings had marked the religious life on the island on many occasions, most recently in 1938, and now ten years later, some Christians there were earnestly praying that God would once again visit them in revival power. The minister at Barvas, the Rev James Murray Mackay, had been led to write to Duncan through the prayers of his congregation, and in particular two elderly sisters named Peggy and Christine Smith who had received the God-given assurance that Duncan would be the instrument that God would use to fulfil His purposes on the island.

Duncan was quite unaware of these things and he intended to stay in Lewis for just ten days and then take a rest from his mission work. However, despite his tiredness, he immediately recognised the feeling of spiritual expectation amongst the people who had invited him to Barvas, and after the preaching service on the second evening he was there, the congregation lingered outside the church and were joined by others who had not attended the meeting. At that moment, the voice of a young man was heard praying aloud inside the church, and many were moved to join him as a sense of deep conviction came over the crowd. The church was soon filled with people calling upon God for mercy and praising Him for His goodness, and even when they separated in the early hours of the morning, small groups went on praying in various parts of the village. The powerful awakening which swept through Barvas in the following days was not an isolated event, and although Duncan Campbell's preaching was similarly blessed when services were hastily arranged in villages such as Tarbert, Leurbost and Arnol, the revival was felt throughout the whole of Lewis, to such an extent that he later described it as "a community saturated with God". Neither was it a temporary feature in the lives of the islanders, as ministers such as the Rev Angus MacFarlane and the Rev Murdo MacLennan of Carloway, as well as the Rev Mackay of Barvas, all testified to the lasting effects experienced in their churches. Furthermore, other waves of revival occurred in the next few years, such as that which broke out on the tiny island of Berneray in 1952 when Duncan felt a call to preach there while he was at a convention in northern Ireland, and the annual mission which he regularly led at Stornoway was often richly blessed.

It was only to be expected that Duncan would receive a stream of invitations to conduct missions in many other places besides Scotland and he had a continuous list of engagements until 1956 when his health broke down while he was taking services at Torquay. After a brief rest in Switzerland, he was allowed to keep a long-standing promise to visit South Africa on condition he did not preach more than four times a week! Duncan had to accept that the work of itinerant evangelism which he so loved was coming to an end and when he returned to Scotland, it was to take charge of the Training Home and Bible College of the Faith Mission. In this position, from 1958 to 1966, he was able to inspire a succession of students as they prepared for the ministry, and to impart to them the longing for revival which he felt so deeply. Yet even with his full commitment to training the students, Duncan still found time to take meetings wherever he believed that God had work for him to do. He regularly went to northern Ireland to help in the evangelical witness there and also made the first of a series of visits to south Wales, where his preaching was blessed with great power.

After his official "retirement" from the Training Home in 1966, Duncan was free once again to undertake more extensive tours and although his health had been uncertain for some time, in 1969 he accepted a programme of engagements in Canada and America. He had always felt a particular affection for Canada since his life had been saved by a Canadian soldier in the First World War, and the fruitful results of his ministry in Saskatchewan were seen two years later when a spiritual awakening began in Saskatoon and effected a large part of western Canada. While he was in the United States, Duncan met Loren Cunningham and his wife who were prayerfully seeking guidance on setting up a place in Europe for training in evangelism and he willingly agreed to help in every way he could. It was through his cooperation on this venture that Duncan was invited to lecture at the school when it was opened at Lausanne in Switzerland, and it was a great joy to him to spend his last years preparing young men and women for the task of evangelism. Duncan still fulfilled his annual engagement at the mission in Stornoway until 1971 but shortly after returning to Lausanne in 1972 he collapsed and died. His last message to the students had been based on the text, "so fight I, not as one that beateth the air" (1 Cor 9:26), and it was a verse that could serve as a fitting summary of the life and witness of Duncan Campbell.