

A Master in Israel

Angus MacIntosh was a native of Strathdearn, in Inverness-shire. Early dedicated to God by devoted parents, and converted by His grace, he was ordained as minister of a Gaelic chapel in Glasgow in 1792, was translated to Tain in 1797, and died in 1831. He left a reputation for piety and ministerial excellencies unsurpassed by any of the more-recently-departed worthies of the northern Highlands. His Glasgow ministry was brief, but largely blessed. To Tain he was called by the voice of the people prevailing over an attempt to impose on them, by force of patronage, a minister they did not esteem. The magistrates and elders of that town had, at every vacancy since the Revolution, resolutely resisted or ignored what they held to be the usurpation of patronage, and had practically made good their right of choice. And this right they had on each occasion exercised so as to secure a succession of evangelical and spiritually-minded ministers, and to preserve to the place its ancient character as a centre of religious influence.

Of those ministers, Dr Angus MacIntosh was probably the greatest. On his settlement he was “at once recognised by the many eminent Christians then in the northern counties as the master in Israel. ‘The great Ross-shire ministers now gone’, said one of these Christians after hearing him a few times, ‘had each his own characteristic excellency. The preaching of Mr MacPhail [of Resolis] was experimental; Mr Fraser [of Alness] was the systematic divine; and Mr Porteous [of Kilmuir Easter] was the expounder of Scripture, and my belief is that Mr MacIntosh combines the excellencies of all the three.’

“When it was known that he was to assist at the communion in any parish, thousands came from great distances to be present. He almost always presided in the open air in Gaelic on the Lord’s day, while the smaller English congregation met in the church under the parish minister. . . . Dr MacIntosh enters the tent, and after praise he offers up a solemn, moving prayer. He reads his text, and for a time he is calm, with little action; and his deep-toned, melodious voice is heard by the most distant of eight or ten thousand people. He begins by showing the great doctrines revealed in his text, and the great lessons taught in it. Then his application commences; his eye kindles, and his voice is louder; his very countenance shows how thoroughly he believes what he says. At one time you see deep, awful compassion, a cloud on the countenance; at another, the sun breaks through the clouds, and there is a beautiful smile. He comes to the fencing of the tables and, after a few solemn truths addressed to the worldly professor, he deals with God’s children. He follows the perplexed inquirer through all his wanderings; he comes down to the first breathings of the divine life in the soul; and he encourages the weakest to come with all his darkness and perplexity to meet Christ at His table.

“After the communion, he generally concluded with an address; and here he specially shone. After a few pithy words to the communicants, he turned to the thousands of the young and thoughtless before him, and he spoke to them God’s message with a power and an unction and an authority which made the most careless listen. In telling sinners of their danger, he spoke as one who saw it vividly; his fine eye was frequently filled with tears, and his voice and manner made them feel as if thunder were rolling over their head. This was followed up by holding forth Christ as the living, present, all-gracious Saviour; and by the most melting appeals to the worst and the vilest to come to Him even now, with all their sins, that they might even now be saved. He seemed unwilling to part with them till they fled for refuge to Christ, and with a thorough knowledge of their own language and phrases, he plied them with illustrations and arguments.” (2)

On these occasions, as he himself declared when near the end of his earthly course, he used to feel as if he were already breathing the very air of heaven; and so richly blessed were they that for a long time after he came to Ross-shire, a number of persons from other parishes came to consult him about their souls. We have been told of one address of his at Nigg to communicants at the table which was so blessed to lookers-on, that Christian people named that service “the table of mercy”. Indeed, we have often heard it said that he obtained a far greater number of seals to his ministry in other parishes than in his own, though there also it

was greatly blessed. No man in the North united so much loving tenderness with so much ministerial authority. He won the confidence of the weakest Christian; the presumptuous and the insubordinate, to whom inferior ministers in outlying spots had given undue place in private intercourse or in fellowship meetings, were in his presence reduced to propriety or silence.

At the end of last century or beginning of this ⁽³⁾, the General Assembly of the Scottish Church, then under "Moderate" sway, were scouting the idea of missions to the heathen world, so that zealous evangelical men in the South had no way of fulfilling Christ's commission but by forming a Missionary Society outside the Church courts. At the same time, Dr Angus MacIntosh took the lead in forming a Northern Missionary Society for the like great ends. On two occasions, one of them the licensing of an unworthy preacher, the other the settlement of an orthodox but, in the opinion of the people, a worldly minister, he and his evangelical brethren in the Presbytery of Tain were on the brink of secession from the Established Church; and this event, which would have altered the whole complexion of the ecclesiastical history of the northern Highlands, was prevented only by providential circumstances that enabled them to escape by a hair's-breadth from an actual violation of their consciences and an actual domination over the Christian people.

What was virtually his death-bed testimony was given during an illness in the year 1828, which he himself and all around him thought would be his last. "I am very weak, as weak as an infant," he said to a dear friend in the ministry, "but I know whom I have believed." "My kind friends would, if they could," he said to those who were endeavouring to relieve his bodily sufferings, "construct a bridge to take me over Jordan; but, O with what contempt I can look at everything else when I get but a glimpse of the finished work of Christ." He addressed loving words to the Christian friends who were admitted to see him, and by them sent messages to others. "Give my love to your dear partner," he said to one of his elders, after bidding him an affectionate farewell, "and tell her that I hope to meet her in Immanuel's happy land."

Contrary to expectation, he recovered. "I do believe," he wrote a few months after to a Christian friend, "that I was brought back from the gates of death in answer to the prayers of my own people, and of many others. Several of them who have most of the spirit of prayer, like yourself, never believed that I was to be removed by my late illness. . . . As for myself, I certainly did think that my change was come, and I was very willing to depart, expecting to be with Christ in another and a better world. The only time I have addressed my people since the fever left me, I could and did tell them that the doctrines I was sent to preach to them were the foundation of my hope and confidence when I thought myself ready to launch into eternity, and that I would not for worlds preach any other gospel than what I have formerly preached." He ministered to his people for two years longer. God saw it meet to make His servant pass through waters of deep affliction before his departure. The death in India of his eldest son, a young man of the highest Christian character and promise, was a peculiarly heavy blow; but he was sustained under it by the gladdening hope of so soon meeting him in the heavenly land. His last illness was short. "And", to quote again from Mr MacGillivray, "amid sorrow deeper and more widespread than ever I saw in the North for any other death, the grave closed over Dr Angus MacIntosh."

Endnotes:

1. Reprinted from the Historical and Biographical Introduction in the volume Memorials of Charles Calder MacIntosh, who was the son of Angus MacIntosh.
2. This quotation was taken from Angus MacGillivray's Sketches of Religion and Revivals of Religion in the North Highlands during the last century.
3. The writer is referring to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.