

**"Christ is All": Horatius Bonar (1808-1889)
and his Christocentric piety¹**

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The remarkable spiritual awakening that took place at Cambuslang, at the time five miles south-east of Glasgow, in the spring and summer of 1742 is well known in the annals of revival. It began in the February of that year with the anointed preaching of William McCulloch (1691-1771), the parish minister, and grew to the point that in July, George Whitefield (1714-1770), the leading evangelist of the eighteenth century, was preaching to crowds of 20,000 or more. Among the other ministers who also preached during those stirring days was one whom Whitefield called "good old Mr Bonner."² The preacher to whom Whitefield was referring was the minister of Torphichen on the outskirts of Edinburgh, John Bonar (1671-1747), a man who had a "lively zeal for the interest of true religion."³ The revival appears to have given Bonar, who was quite infirm and unable to either ride or walk any distance at all, a new lease on life. And though he took three days to travel the 23 miles or so from Torphichen to Cambuslang, he preached three times when he got there with, it was said, "great Life."⁴ When he was about to return home, so filled with joy was he, that he used the words of another aged saint for his farewell: "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,... for mine eyes have seen thy salvation."⁵

John Bonar's evident longing for and delight in revival would characterize at least three of his great-great-grandsons who were also ministers: John James Bonar (1803-1891), ordained minister of St. Andrew's parish, Greenock, on August 20, 1825 and where he remained till the end of his long life; Horatius Bonar (1808-1889), the subject of this paper; and Andrew Alexander Bonar (1810-1892), long remembered for his ministry in Glasgow. These three Bonars

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were brothers who maintained close ties throughout each of their long lives. For instance, they frequently preached for each other during communion seasons.⁶ G. N. M. Collins, for many years Professor of Church History in the Free Church College on the Mound in Edinburgh, knew some aged members of the Greenock church who vividly recalled from their youth a communion service in which all three brothers spoke: one on Christ as Prophet, one on Christ as Priest and the third on Christ as King.⁷ Little wonder it was a service long remembered!

Studying Horatius Bonar

In studying Horatius Bonar's life, however, a major difficulty confronts anyone at the very outset of study, namely, the fact that there has never been a biography written of him. In one sense this is quite unusual, for the world of nineteenth-century British Evangelicalism reveled in big biographies of those who were key figures in their community. In another sense, though, it is quite understandable, since Bonar himself gave strict instructions to his family and executors that there was to be no biography written of his life.⁸ However, in the twenty years following his death there did appear three items that help any would-be student of the life of this Scottish Evangelical.

Horatius Bonar, D.D.: A Memorial (1889; 2nd ed., 1890) contains funeral sermons preached by admirers of Bonar at the time of his death, some of Bonar's own sermons and the first few pages of an autobiographical sketch that Bonar drew up in 1888 to celebrate his jubilee as a minister of the gospel but which he never finished. Then, there is the *Memories of Dr. Horatius Bonar* (1909), which consists of various short reminiscences about Bonar as a Christian and about his ministry and theological convictions. Most of them were written by those who had known Bonar, like his son-in-law, David M. McIntyre (1859-1938), the colleague and successor of Horatius' younger

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brother Andrew in Finnieston, Glasgow. Finally, there is an essay, "Horatius Bonar and his Hymns" (1904), which was written as an introduction to a large selection of his hymns by his only son to survive him, Horatius Ninian Bonar.⁹

Early years

Horatius Bonar was born in Edinburgh on December 19, 1808. His parents, James Bonar (1757-1821), the Depute-Solicitor of Excise in Edinburgh, and his wife Marjory Maitland (d.1854), had eleven children, of whom three died in infancy. James Bonar was an elder in Lady Glenorchy's Chapel, a bulwark of Edinburgh Evangelicalism that had been founded in 1774 with money donated by Lady Glenorchy (1741-1786), a wealthy patroness of Evangelical causes.¹⁰ However, James Bonar died when Horatius was but 13, and thus the greatest influence on him during his early years were a godly mother and his eldest brother James (1801-1867). Long afterwards he versified his gratitude to God for a godly upbringing:

I thank Thee for a holy ancestry;
I bless Thee for a godly parentage;
For seeds of truth and light and purity,
Sown in this heart from childhood's earliest age.

For word and church and watchful ministry,—
The beacon and the tutor and the guide;
For the parental hand and lip and eye,
That kept me far from snares on every side.¹¹

There are no known details, though, of Horatius' conversion.

Horatius was educated at Edinburgh High School. He was a good student, though not brilliant like his younger brother Andrew Bonar. He went on to study at Edinburgh University before entering the Divinity Hall, where the Professor of Divinity was Thomas

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Chalmers (1780-1847), whom Bonar later considered the greatest Christian he ever knew.¹² From the very first lecture that Bonar heard from Chalmers' lips, the latter had an enormous influence on Bonar the young man of God. By God's grace Chalmers helped to deepen Bonar's commitment to the Calvinism of his forebears. His spirituality would therefore be a Reformed spirituality. Then, Chalmers gave Bonar an urgency to preach the Gospel, an urgency which lasted all of his life—his spirituality was thus one that expressed itself in passionate evangelism.¹³

Another important influence on Horatius Bonar, as well as on his younger brother Andrew, were some lectures on the Book of Revelation that were given in Edinburgh over the years 1828 to 1830 by Edward Irving (1792-1834). At the time Irving was one of the most popular Presbyterian preachers. In 1833, though, he would be removed from the ministry of the Church of Scotland for espousing the view that Christ's humanity was so one with that of all human beings that he possessed sinful inclinations. In Irving's estimation, only Christ's being indwelt by the Holy Spirit prevented him from actually sinning. Horatius Bonar, though, would have agreed with his friend Robert Murray McCheyne (1813-1843) when the latter described Irving as "a holy man in spite of all his delusions and errors."¹⁴

The long-lasting influence of Irving's lectures on Horatius in particular can be seen, for instance, in *The Quarterly Journal of Prophecy*, a publication that Horatius edited from 1848 to 1873 and that was designed to promote premillennial eschatology. More than a few of his hymns also sought to press home this prophetic perspective. A good example is "I know not in what watch He comes," written in mid-March, 1880. The first stanza and final two run thus:

I know not in what watch He comes,
Or at what hour He may appear,
Whether at midnight or at morn,
Or in what season of the year;

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I only know that He is near.

...The centuries have gone and come,
Dark centuries of absence drear;
I dare not chide the long delay,
Nor ask when I His voice shall hear;
I only know that He is near.

I do not think it can be long
Till in His glory He appear;
And yet I dare not name the day,
Nor fix the solemn Advent year;
I only know that he is near.¹⁵

Another key influence on Bonar was a group of young men called the "*Exegetical Society*," who met every Saturday morning at 6:30 am for prayer and Bible study. In addition to Horatius Bonar and his brother Andrew Bonar, men like Robert Murray McCheyne and William Burns were involved in this society.¹⁶

St. John's, Leith (1833-1837)

After being licensed to preach in 1833, Bonar's first ministerial appointment was at Leith, the port of Edinburgh, where he worked as an assistant minister to James Lewis in the parish of St. John's. Bonar had the responsibility of running the Sunday School, in which younger brother Andrew also served for a while as a teacher, and doing mission work in a very rough area of Leith.¹⁷ The latter involved house-to-house visitation in the mediaeval core of the port, which still consists of a maze of narrow streets and lanes. It was also arduous work in that he had to ascend hundreds of stone staircases to knock on the doors of the various homes.¹⁸

Lewis secured a hall in which Bonar could also give public addresses twice on a Sunday to about 200 or so and in which the Sunday school could operate in the evening. At the first meeting in the

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hall, the congregation was startled at one point by the entrance of one whom Bonar described as "a furious woman" who came into the hall yelling, "My curse and the curse of God of God be upon you." But, as Bonar noted, "the curse did not come" and instead there was rich blessing.¹⁹

North Parish Church, Kelso (1837-1866)

Word of Bonar's effective preaching came to the ears of a newly established congregation in Kelso, the North Parish Church, which sent a deputation to hear Bonar preach and sound him out regarding a call to their church. As it turned out, they were deeply impressed by Bonar and in the autumn of 1837 Bonar was unanimously called to the North Parish Church in Kelso. He would labour in this town in the Scottish Borders for 29 years. The keynote that he sounded right from the start of his Kelso ministry was "Ye must be born again" (John 3:7).²⁰ Bonar was rightly convinced that without this emphasis from the pulpit on the vital need for personal regeneration "all religion is hollow and superficial."²¹

One of Bonar's successors at Kelso was W. Robertson Nicoll (1851-1923), who was minister there from 1877 to 1885 and who later became a well-known author and journalist. Nicoll noted that Bonar's ministry at Kelso was one of

quenchless zeal and unrelenting labour. He set himself to evangelise the Borderland. His name was fragrant in every little village, and at most of the farms. He conducted many meetings in farm kitchens and village schoolrooms, and often preached in the open air. The memory of some sermons lingered... The chief characteristic of his preaching was its strange solemnity. It was full of entreaty and of warning. Dr. Bonar exhibited with faithful simplicity and decision the great things of the Gospel, but he was never content without applying them to the consciences of his hearers.²²

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An elder who was with Bonar all through his Kelso ministry commented after Bonar had left the church that Bonar "allowed himself but a very few hours of sleep. He was always working, and always working for Christ."²³

It was at Kelso that Bonar also became convinced of the importance of Christian literature as a vital means of evangelism and Christian nurture. To that end he began writing while at Kelso a series of tracts and small booklets that could be printed cheaply and widely distributed. From the titles of those written by Bonar,²⁴—for example: *Believe and Live*, *The Well of Living Water*, *Luther's Conversion*, *The Lord's Supper*, *Do you go the Prayer-Meeting?*—it can be seen that they covered a variety of subjects, but a central theme was evangelistic. The series became known as "The Kelso Tracts." A snippet of the publishing history of simply one of these tracts, *Believe and Live*, can help one gauge something of the extraordinary impact of these booklets. It was first printed in 1839. Seventy years later it was estimated that a million copies of it had been put into circulation!²⁵

A few passages from this tract well illustrate the evangelistic spirituality that marked Bonar all of his life:

...how shall God show his love to sinners and yet be just? The work of Christ declares this. It discloses to us the depth of God's love to man, even when he became a sinner. It shows us that having secured all the ends of holiness and justice by the death of his Son in the room of the sinner, he is now at full liberty to let that love flow out to sinners. The blood of Christ proclaims to us how much God is *in earnest* in his hatred of sin on the one hand, and in his love to the sinner upon the other. ...Do not say, I *cannot* believe. Christ says, *ye will not* (John 5:40). It is your unwillingness that keeps you from believing. Do not say, I am seeking Christ, but cannot find Him. This is not true. It is Christ who is seeking you, and not you who are seeking Christ. Cease to flee from Him. Allow Him to save you. Do not mock Him by trying to save your-

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selves; or by trying to *help* Him to save you; or by trying to persuade Him to *help you* to save yourselves. ...Do not say, I have done all I can, and am waiting for the Spirit. It is not true. He is waiting for you. He would come in and dwell in you if you would only give over resisting Him. Do not excuse yourselves and throw the blame on God, by referring to our Lord's words, "No man can come to me except the Father draw him;" (John 6:44) for the meaning of that is plain, as showing the manner in which our unwillingness is overcome. We must be drawn, for we struggle and resist. ...Here are glad tidings for you! There is but a step between you and life! This very moment you may enter into peace! This very moment you may come and say Abba, Father! All things are ready and you are welcome! Your Father seeks you: He has no pleasure in your death: He is in real earnest when he asks you to turn and live. His interest in your welfare is sincere and deep. Oh, then, return and be at rest! *Believe* what he has told you about the finished work of his Son, and arise and go to him... Ho, ye that are afar off—wandering in misery through the waste howling wilderness—return, return! The storm is rising—the last fatal storm—and where will you find shelter? Here is the refuge from the storm and the covert from the tempest—in the finished and accepted work of Immanuel (Isaiah 25:4; 26:20; 32:2; Matthew 23:37).

The Night of Weeping (1845)

These tracts opened the way for other literary endeavours. In 1845 his first book, *The Night of Weeping; or, Words for the Suffering Family of God*, appeared.²⁶ Over the course of his life, Bonar's ministry was very successful, but he was no stranger to suffering. Five of Bonar's children died in quick succession, which made a powerful impact upon him. As a result, the issue of the place of suffering in the Christian life was never far from the surface of his thoughts and was frequently addressed in his various books and booklets.

In *The Night of Weeping* Bonar argues that "the family badge" of Christians is that "they are all cross-bearers."²⁷ While Christians are

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distinguished by various family resemblances—things such as Being "sprinkled with the same blood" and all singing "one song"—this one is ultimately pre-eminent:

...they are all cross-bearers. This is the unfailing token by which each member may be recognized. They all bear a cross. Nor do they hide it as if ashamed of it. 'God forbid that I should boast, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified to us, and we unto the world' (Gal. 6:14). Sometimes it is lighter, and sometimes it is heavier; sometimes it has more shame and suffering and sometimes less, but still it is upon them.²⁸

From Bonar's perspective, suffering is simply inevitable in this "vale of tears" through which we are passing as sojourners and pilgrims. This is the way that our Lord and Master went, and we are "followers of the Man with the pierced hands and feet."²⁹ Moreover, as such, it is an enormous consolation to know that others have traveled this path before us and felt its pain.

The path of sorrow is no unfrequented way. All the saints have trodden it. We can trace their footprints there. It is comforting, nay, it is cheering to keep this in mind. Were we cast fettered into some low dungeon, would it not be consolation to know that many a martyr had been there before us; would it not be cheering to read their names written with their own hands all round the ancient wall? Such is the solace that we may extract from all suffering for the furnace into which we are cast has been consecrated by many a saint already.³⁰

The image used here by Bonar is significant. The footprints of the saints are imprinted on the road of faith ahead of us. In our journey through life, we therefore follow behind them, and so share their experiences and sorrows, even as we shall finally share their joy at entering through the gates of the heavenly city.

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For Bonar, it is essential to keep the Christian hope as a backdrop to our experience of suffering.

“If we suffer, we shall also reign with him” [2 Timothy 2:12]. Of this we are assured. Oneness in suffering here is the pledge of oneness in glory hereafter. The two things are inseparable. His shame is ours on earth; his glory shall be ours in heaven. Therefore let us “rejoice, inasmuch as we are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, we may be glad also with exceeding joy” (1 Peter 4:13).³¹

The hope of heaven thus allows us to persevere in this vale of suffering, coping with the hardship of exile, yet all the time knowing that its days are numbered. One day, we shall return home.

We are but as wayfaring men, wandering in the lonely night, who see dimly upon the distant mountain peak the reflection of a sun that never rises here, but which shall never set in the ‘new heavens’ thereafter.

And this is enough. It comforts and cheers us on our dark and rugged way.³²

This is very powerful imagery—the distant mountain peak laced with a sunlight we cannot fully see in this world with the Promised Land beyond, on the other side of the mountain, and on which the sun of God’s radiance and glory will never set!

Other writings

The Night of Weeping, which would sell 59,000 copies or so over the next few years, was followed by a flow of books, sermon collections and biographies from the “ceaseless activity of his pen”—as his friend Alexander Somerville put it.³³ In addition, he was also involved in the editing of a number of periodicals, including *The Quarterly Journal of Prophecy* mentioned above, and *The Christian*

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Treasury, which was widely-read and to which authors from various evangelical denominations contributed. A recent statement in the introduction to a reprint of one of his books well sums up the significance of this literary ministry. According to this statement, Bonar was "clearly one of the most valued evangelical writers of the nineteenth century and he has to be bracketed with J. C. Ryle and C. H. Spurgeon in his understanding of the power of the press and in putting it to extensive use."³⁴

It is his hymns, though, that are the literary endeavour for which he is probably most remembered today.³⁵ Bonar had begun writing hymns in Leith for the children who attended the Sabbath school that he supervised. There were over 280 of them present on any given Sunday—in one of his notebooks he actually noted the names of all the boys and girls in the Sunday school. What struck him as he first watched them in 1833 during their times of worship was how fidgety many of them were. He soon came up with the idea of providing them with hymns of their own, set to tunes the children knew well and liked to sing. The experiment, as it were, worked and he noticed a marked improvement in their paying attention during the times of worship in the Sabbath school.³⁶

Just as the writing of small tracts had led on to bigger literary projects, so the children's hymns eventually led, in 1836,³⁷ to his writing hymns that were for the use of older worshippers. The first of these was the well-known hymn, "Go, labour on; spend, and be spent." It breathes the evangelistic passion that characterized Bonar's ministry all of his life:

Go, labour on; spend, and be spent,—
Thy joy to do the Father's will:
It is the way the Master went,
Should not the servant tread it still?...

Go, labour on while it is day;

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The world's dark night is hastening on;
Speed, speed thy work, cast sloth away;
It is not thus that souls are won.

Toil on, faint not, keep watch and pray;
Be wise the erring soul to win;
Go forth into the world's highway,
Compel the wanderer to come in.

Toil on, and in thy toil rejoice!
For toil comes rest, for exile home;
Soon shalt thou hear the Bridegroom's voice,
The midnight peal, "Behold, I come!"³⁸

He went on to publish over 600 hymns and poems during the course of his life,³⁹ a number of which have rightly led to his being regarded as the finest Scottish hymn-writer of the nineteenth century.⁴⁰ Among this number are such hymns as "I heard the voice of Jesus say"—originally entitled by Bonar as "The Voice from Galilee"⁴¹—his communion hymn, "Here O my Lord, I see Thee face to face,"⁴² and "Not what these hands have done," a rich meditation on the central emphases of Reformed thought.

Revival

This writing ministry came at a time when Scotland was hungry for the Word of God and its exposition. In the late 1830s and the early 1840s Scotland knew genuine revival.⁴³ Beginning at Kilsyth in late July, 1839, it soon spread to other areas of the Lowlands—Dundee and Perth were especially impacted—and from there to the rest of Scotland. In Dundee, the revival was centred on St. Peter's, the ministerial charge of Robert McCheyne, though McCheyne himself was away on a mission trip to Palestine with Andrew Bonar when the revival began.⁴⁴ Throughout much of August and the early months of autumn that year, crowded meetings were held every day, with con-

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siderable numbers in distress about the state of their souls and subsequently professing salvation. St. Leonard's in Perth, where Horatius Bonar's friend John Milne was the minister, saw similar scenes of spiritual blessing. Throughout the early months of 1840 two services were held there every day with the evening ones lasting up to three or four hours.

Although Horatius Bonar in Kelso was not at the epicentre of this spiritual awakening, he and his congregation were not untouched in this time of remarkable blessing. As he summed up this move of God:

During this season there were all the marks of a work of God which we see in the account given of the preaching of the gospel by the apostles. The multitude was divided, families were divided; the people of God were knit together, they were filled with zeal and joy and heavenly-mindedness; they continued steadfast, and increased in doctrine and fellowships, being daily in church and in prayer-meetings, and numbers were constantly turning to the Lord.⁴⁵

The Disruption of 1843

In 1843, near the beginning of his Kelso ministry, there occurred what has been called "the most important event in the history of nineteenth-century Scotland," namely the Disruption,⁴⁶ which cut the Church of Scotland in two. Two issues were central to this momentous event which had a major impact on Bonar and his ministry.

First, whether or not ministers could be imposed on congregations at the wish of patrons who owned the land on which the church buildings sat, even when such a settlement was contrary to the will of the congregations.

Second, in connection with their objections to such patronage the Evangelicals in the Church of Scotland wanted to revitalize the idea that to be a pastor one had to know oneself called by God to such a

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ministry. Ministry was not to be regarded, as some did, as a vocation anyone could enter. It was rooted in a call from God.

Those who wished to uphold the practice of parish patronage appealed to the civil courts to decide the issue. Bonar's old theology professor, Thomas Chalmers, led those who, wishing to honour the sovereignty of Christ over the affairs of his Church, maintained that the civil authorities had no jurisdiction in the spiritual realm of the church. Bonar gave voice to the view of the latter when he stated in November, 1842, that:

The whole contest...has been concerning the laws of Christ, more especially those pertaining to the choosing of Ministers and the government of his Church. We have held that Christ's people ought to have the calling of their Ministers, and that it is through them (i.e. through his people) that he expresses his mind, so as to point out the fitting Pastor, and not through the Presbytery or the Patron. Again, we have held, that Christ's ordained office-bearers are the only rulers of his Church and administrators of his laws, with whose discipline, government, ordination, deposition, excommunication, no civil lawgiver or judge may interfere. The questions, then, on which the controversy has hinged, have been such as these. Is Christ our law-giver? Is he our *only* lawgiver?... When Christ's laws and man's laws are opposed to each other, which are we to obey?⁴⁷

Here Bonar reveals a Christ-centred spirituality—Christ and his lordship had to be central in every aspect of church life.⁴⁸ So it was that rather than abandon the Church's independence from the state and Christ's absolute authority in the Church, Bonar along with his congregation decided to give up the privileges of being part of the established Church of Scotland.

In many cases, those who left the national church gave up "salary and security. Manses had to be vacated, new places of worship... found, incredible hardships... endured."⁴⁹ Bonar's congregation at

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Kelso spent twenty years in court litigation, from 1843 to 1863 roughly, till eventually it was ruled that the church building belonged to the Established Church and the congregation had to leave. All told slightly more than 450 ministers out of an estimated 1,195 ministers separated from the Church of Scotland in May, 1843, to form the Church of Scotland Free (better known as the Free Church of Scotland). Somewhere between 40 and 50 per cent, estimates vary, of the membership of the Established Church went with the Free Church.

Chalmers Memorial Church, Edinburgh (1866-1889)

Horatius Bonar's final sphere of ministry was in Edinburgh, the city in which he had grown up. He had received several calls to other spheres of ministry during his time at Kelso, but he never seriously considered leaving until called in June, 1866, to become the first minister at the newly established Chalmers' Memorial Church (now St. Catherine's in the Grange Church).⁵⁰ He was there till his death on July 31, 1889.

Under his ministry, the church grew from a mere handful when he came to over 800 communicants at the Lord's Table in 1888.⁵¹ His preaching⁵²—he preached up until September 11, 1887, a year and three-quarters before his death—and writing focused especially on two things: the centrality of the cross of Christ and the absolute sufficiency of Christ for all of a sinner's needs. In 1888, when he celebrated his jubilee as a minister, he referred to "twenty-two chequered years" of ministry in Edinburgh—evidently a reference to the fact that his ministry, like any faithful ministry, had involved blessings and problems, triumphs and setbacks. But he quickly hastened to add that amidst all of the ups and downs of his time at Edinburgh one thing had been constant.

God has been gracious, and has not disowned the work and

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the message. Righteousness without works to the sinner, simply on his acceptance of the divine message concerning Jesus and His sufficiency, this has been the burden of our good news. "Through this Man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins, and by Him all that believe are justified from all things" [Acts 13:38-39]. It is one message, one gospel, one cross, one sacrifice, from which nothing can be taken, and to which nothing can be added. This is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the ending of our ministry. Sad and useless must be the ministry of any one to whom this gospel in its simplicity is not all in all.⁵³

This emphasis on the ongoing validity and stability of the apostolic gospel was a much-needed one in the last forty years of the nineteenth century when many in Britain were calling for making "progress" in theology and were actively discarding older perspectives. Bonar would have none of it. As he wrote in his 1866 "Preface" to his edition of the *Catechisms of the Scottish Reformation*:

It is not from the mere love of what is old or national, that I have been led to re-edit these rudimental standards of the Church of Scotland. I wish certainly to preserve them; but not as mere fossils for a museum; not as the footprints of an extinct race; not as relics of an exploded theology, or an obsolete religion. I would reprint them because of their genuine and unaltered value, and as embodying truths which are quite as necessary for us as they were for our fathers.

The truths of the Reformation are not obsolete. ... They are not old anchorage-ground, which the elevation of the coast during these three centuries has left dry. Nor are these catechisms old anchors from which the cables have been slipped, and which have been left to rust on the beach or sink into the sands; superseded by modern inventions better fitted to abide the storm. The doctrines themselves are not ephemeral, nor have the formulae in which our fathers clothed them been proved to be either inaccurate or inadequate. In so far as they do not fit in with "the spirit of the age," there is room for fair inquiry as to whether the fault may not belong to the age

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rather than to the *dogmata* or their *formulae*.⁵⁴

Later on in this "Preface" he returns to the dangers facing those who would trade fidelity to past truth for present relevancy. It is a long footnote, but deserves to be quoted at length, in particular because of its "relevance" for our own day:

Some well-meaning theological literateurs, or rather amateur theologians, who patronize religion in their own way, are fain to warn us of the danger of not "keeping abreast of the age," as if we were imperilling Christianity by not being quite so learned in modern speculations as they are. We should like, certainly, to "keep abreast" of all that is true and good, either in this age or any other; but as to doing more than that, or singling out this age as being pre-eminently worthy of being kept abreast of, we hesitate. To be "up to" all the errors, fallacies, speculations, fancies, mis-criticisms of the age, would be an achievement of no mean kind; and to require us to be "up to" all this under threat of endangering Christianity, or betraying the Bible, is an exaction which could only be made by men who think that religion is much beholden to them for their condescending patronage; and will only be accepted by men who are timid about the stability of the cross of Christ if left unproped by human wisdom; and who, besides, happen to have three or four lifetimes to spare. We may be in a condition for believing, and even for defending the Bible, without having mastered the whole deistical literature of the last century, or the present. We may be qualified to accept the doctrine of sacrificial substitution even though we are not "up to" all that has been spoken against it from Cain to Colenso.⁵⁵ ...In attempting to "keep abreast of the age," there is some danger of falling short of other ages; and we are not sure but that the object of those who shake this phrase so complacently in our faces, both as a taunt and a threat, is to draw us off from the past altogether, as if the greater bulk of its literature were rude lumber, a mere drag upon progress. ...Old theological terms and Scripture phraseology are set aside, or spoken in an undertone, or used in a loose and convenient sense.

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Sharp adhesion to old doctrines is imbecility; and yet defined expression of the new is avoided, the mind of the age being in a transition state, unable to bear the whole of what the exact and honest exhibition of "advanced" Christianity would require to utter. Many of our young men are more afraid of being reckoned Calvinistic than Platonic; they shrink from bold and definite statements of Reformation doctrine, lest they should be pronounced "not abreast of the age"—stereotyped, if not imbecile. Indefinite language, mystical utterances, negative or defective statements, which will save the speaker's or writer's orthodoxy without compromising his reputation for "intellect" and "liberality"—these are becoming common. Many are doing their best to serve two masters, to preach two gospels, to subscribe two confessions of faith, to worship two Gods to combine two religions, to grasp two worlds; they would fain be neither very evangelical nor very heretical.⁵⁶

The perspective informing Bonar's thought in this passage was that doctrinal error was ultimately a moral issue. As he stated in *God's Way of Holiness* (1864): "error injures, truth heals; error is the root of sin, truth that of purity and perfection."⁵⁷ In other words, doctrine is central to any genuine spirituality—without the coals of orthodoxy there can be no fire of piety.

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On the other hand, Bonar's works are a corrective to those who would promote doctrine at the expense of piety. His writings are filled especially with a Christ-centred piety that delights in the glory of the person of the Lord Jesus and exalts and stands amazed at his cross-work. A good example in this regard is a piece that was written towards the end of his ministry at Kelso and that has a succinct, single-minded focus on Christ. Written in 1861, it is a preface he wrote to a minor seventeenth-century Puritan classic that has been known

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by a variety of titles: *Christ is All* (the title used by Bonar in his edition of the work), *A Guide to Eternal Glory* (the title under which it originally appeared in 1685), and *A Choice Drop of Honey from the Rock Christ*. The author of the work was Thomas Wilcox (1622-1687), a Calvinistic Baptist minister who pastored a London congregation during the difficult days of the reigns of Charles II (r.1660-1685) and James II (r.1685-1688) and who was imprisoned a number of times for refusing to conform to the Church of England.⁵⁸ Bonar evidently had a deep love for that stream of Reformed literature that came down from the Reformation of the sixteenth century through the Puritans to the Evangelicals of the eighteenth century, and he wrote prefaces for a number of editions of works from this Reformed tradition.

His "Preface" to Wilcox's work may be divided into four sections.⁵⁹ In the first section Bonar argues that the Lord Jesus Christ is "the gift of Godhead to us. It is the threefold love of the three-one Jehovah that we find in this gift."⁶⁰ In the first place, Christ came into our world because he was sent by the Father, and thus he can be thought of as "the Father's Gift." Moreover, he came into this world freely and out of love for poor sinners. Thus, Bonar argues,

Christ is His own gift to sinners. He gives himself to us, as well as for us. ...he gives himself to us,—not certain blessings merely, but himself. To the sick, and weary, and poor, and dark, and sorrowful, He presents himself as the one gift—the reception of which, by us, would deliver us from sin, and want, and grief.⁶¹

Bonar proceeds to note that there is also a very real sense in which the Holy Spirit is also the Giver of the gift that is the Lord Jesus. When preachers urge sinners to embrace the salvation in Christ, they do so in the strength of the Spirit. "It is by the voice of the Spirit," he writes, "that this gift is proclaimed to us," so that "Christ is the

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gift of the Spirit's love as truly as He is the gift of the Father's love."⁶²

Bonar further notes in this regard that the gift of Christ is not simply an expression of the "threefold love" of the Godhead for sinners. It is a gift that reveals "the infinite evil of sin." The sinners for whom the gift is given are utterly guilty according to the law of God. The only way their guilt can be removed is for one to pay the penalty of their sin, and "nothing short of the death of Christ can accomplish this end." Bonar thus highlights the fact that central to the biblical perspective about the gift that is Christ is not his incarnation but his death for sinners.

If mere incarnation could have done the work, would love have gone further, and demanded something more expensive and terrible? If all that were needed was, that the Word should "take flesh," would the bitterness of death have been added? It is in the "blood-shedding"—the giving of life for life—that the real character of the gift is seen...⁶³

In the second section of the "Preface" Bonar lists eight crucial things that God has said in his Word about the gift that is Christ.

First, Christ is described by Scripture as the life of his people. As John 1:4 puts it, "In him was life." Bonar stresses that all of the believer's spiritual life—from its very beginning when Christ first comes into the life of one dead in sin and quickens that sinner to the believer's "consummated perfection" in glory—comes from Christ.⁶⁴ As he puts it in his hymn "One Christ we feed upon, one living Christ":

One Christ we feed upon, one living Christ,
Who once was dead, but lives for ever now;...

My life, my everlasting life art Thou,
My health, my joy, my strength, I owe to Thee:
Because Thou livest, I shall also live,
And where Thou art in glory, there I too shall be.

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Thou *with* us, and Thou *in* us,—this is life...⁶⁵

Then, as Paul maintains in 2 Corinthians 5:21, Christ has been made the believer's righteousness. Christ's righteousness, the complete fulfillment of the law, that was wrought through his earthly life, is imputed to the believer. As Bonar put it elsewhere:

Jehovah is satisfied with Christ's obedience. He is well pleased with His righteousness. And when we, crediting his testimony to that obedience and that righteousness, consent to be treated by Him on the footing of its perfection, then He is satisfied and well pleased with us. ...[Such faith] knits us to the infinite worthiness of Him in whom the Father delights; and so knitting us, presents us perfect in the perfection of another.⁶⁶

And in one of his notes to Wilcox's tract, Bonar quotes from the eighteenth-century Evangelical Anglican John Berridge (1716-1793): "a robe I must have of one whole piece, broad as the law, spotless as the light, and richer than an angel ever wore, the robe of Jesus."⁶⁷

Third, Christ is the peace of his people. Through his death on the cross he reconciles sinners and God, and gives peace to the guilty conscience. In fact, not only does Christ give peace, but, in the words of Ephesians 2:14, "he is our peace." As Bonar explains:

The knowledge of self, troubles; but the knowledge of Christ pacifies and gladdens. The knowledge of sin terrifies, but the knowledge of Christ gives peace and drives away all fear.⁶⁸

Fourth, according to such Johannine texts as John 1:4, 9, and 8:12 Christ has come into this world as the Light that drives away our darkness, reveals the Father and his love, and dispels the gloom from our lives. In the words of one of Bonar's hymns,

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He has come! the Christ of God:
Left for us His glad abode,
Stooping from His throne of bliss
To this darksome wilderness.

He has come! the Prince of Peace;
Come to bid our sorrows cease;
Come to scatter with His light
All the shadows of our night.⁶⁹

Then, Christ is our wisdom, an assertion found in such passages as Colossians 2:3 and I Corinthians 1:30. Sixth, since unbelievers are utterly paralyzed as to doing what is good, Christ is appointed to be their strength after their conversion. Moreover, Bonar affirms, as this human need is met in Christ,

God does not fill us anew with strength in ourselves,— depositing it within us, that we may use it at pleasure. Our strength, like our life, is deposited in Christ. He is our strength, and it is only by having continual recourse to Him that we are strong.⁷⁰

Bonar put this vital truth this way in one of his more famous hymns:

I have no help but thine; nor do I need
Another arm save thine to lean upon;
It is enough, my Lord, enough indeed;
My strength is in thy might, thy might alone.⁷¹

Christ is also the believer's consolation and comfort. Bonar is quite aware that the Scriptures, notably the Gospel of John, call the Holy Spirit "the Comforter." But, true to his Christ-centredness, Bonar states that the comfort that the Spirit gives is drawn out of Christ. The Spirit comforts the people of God by opening up the unsearchable riches of Christ. "Christ is the well," Bonar goes on to say, "out of which He [i.e. the Holy Spirit] brings the draughts of

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abundant consolation, with which He refreshes and revives us in our weariness."⁷² In *God's Way of Peace*, Bonar makes the same point in this way: "your medicine and your physician are not the same, yet they go together. Christ is your medicine, the Spirit is your physician."⁷³

Finally, Bonar argues, Christ is the believer's hope—hope for the future and hope of glory in heaven. As he stresses:

Our own doings are not our hope. Our feelings, our experiences, our evidences, our graces, are not our hope. They can neither kindle nor keep alive the heavenly flame. It is Christ that is our hope.⁷⁴

Or as he put in an issue of *The Christian Treasury*:

'Christ in you the hope of glory.' An indwelling Christ is our earnest, our pledge, our hope of glory. Having Him, we have all that is His, whether present or to come.⁷⁵

In the third section of the "Preface", Bonar looks at various ways that the Scriptures talk about the relationship between Christ and his people. For example, Colossians 2:7 talks of Christians being "rooted and built up" in Christ. Or Jude 1 says that believers are "preserved in Jesus Christ."⁷⁶ These various descriptions of the connection between Christ and his people reinforce what Bonar has been seeking to show in the second section of the "Preface," namely that "Christ is All" for believers. Thus, Bonar can exhort sinners outside of Christ to recognize that

All that a sinner needs is to be found in Christ; for that which is in Him, is for sinners... Out of Christ there is, and there can be nothing but what is evil. In Him there is everything that the soul stands in need of.⁷⁷

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In the fourth and final section of the "Preface," Bonar reviews the way in which this testimony about the all-sufficiency of Christ has been faithfully maintained in the history of the Church since the days of the Reformation.⁷⁸ He refers to men like Martin Luther (1483-1546), Thomas Boston (1677-1732), and William Romaine (1714-1795).

And Bonar, having gone to his reward, can also be included among this line of faithful witnesses. One of his hymns that clearly glories in the fact that Christ is All for the true believer forms a fitting conclusion to this paper:

Not what these hands have done
Can save this guilty soul;
Not what this toiling flesh has borne
Can make my spirit whole.

Not what I feel or do
Can give me peace with God;
Not all my prayers, and sighs, and tears,
Can bear my awful load.

Thy work alone, O Christ,
Can ease this weight of sin;
Thy blood alone, O Lamb of God,
Can give me peace within.

Thy love to me, O God,
Not mine, O Lord, to Thee,
Can rid me of this dark unrest,
And set my spirit free.

Thy grace alone, O God,
To me can pardon speak;
Thy power alone, O Son of God,
Can this sore bondage break.

I bless the Christ of God;

"Christ is All"

I rest on love divine;
And with unfaltering lip and heart
I call this Saviour mine.⁷⁹

ENDNOTES

¹In the preparation of this paper, I wish to acknowledge the help of Rev. William McKnight of Bangor, N. Ireland; Mrs. Faith Cook of Breaston, Derbyshire; Mrs. Marion Meadows, librarian at Heritage Theological Seminary, Cambridge, Ontario; Rev. George McGuinness of Memphis, Tennessee; and Rev. Dr. Joel Beeke of Grand Rapids, Michigan.

²Cited Arthur Fawcett, *The Cambuslang Revival: The Scottish Evangelical Revival of the Eighteenth Century* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), 121. Whitefield's spelling is a clue to the pronunciation of the family name. On John Bonar, see "Bonar, John", *The Dictionary of National Biography* (Repr. London: Oxford University Press, 1973), II, 798; William McKnight, "Horatius Bonar" (Unpublished handwritten ms., 22 pages, n.d.), I-4 [a copy of this ms. is in the author's possession]. For a list of John Bonar's descendants who were ministers, see *Horatius Bonar, D.D.: A Memorial* (2nd ed.; London: James Nisbet & Co./Edinburgh: Andrew Stevenson, 1890), 114-116.

³McKnight, "Horatius Bonar", 3.

⁴Fawcett, *Cambuslang Revival*, 121.

⁵Fawcett, *Cambuslang Revival*, 121-122.

⁶R. H. Lundie, "Sermon" in *Horatius Bonar, D.D.: A Memorial*, 12-13; H.N. Bonar, "Horatius Bonar and His Hymns" in his selected and arranged, *Hymns of Horatius Bonar* (London: Henry Frowde, 1904), xx; "Introduction" to Horatius Bonar, *Words Old and New* (1866 ed; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), x. This "Introduction" is a concise study of Bonar's life and thought.

⁷McKnight, "Horatius Bonar", 7.

⁸McKnight, "Horatius Bonar", 8.

⁹*Hymns of Horatius Bonar*, v-xxxix. For other studies of his life not hitherto mentioned, see *Memories of Dr. Horatius Bonar* (Edinburgh/London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1909); T. B., "Bonar, Horatius", *The Dictionary of National Biography* (Repr. London: Oxford University Press, 1973), XXII, Supplement, 231-232; John S. Andrews, "Bonar, Horatius" in Donald M. Lewis, ed., *The Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography 1730-1860* (Oxford/Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1995), I, 117-118.

On the Web, a good place to start is Dale Tedder, "The Horatius Bonar Homepage" (<http://members.aol.com/OrthodoxUM/BonarHome.html>);

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accessed May 25, 2004).

¹⁰ On Lady Glenorchy, see D. A. Currie, "Glenorchy, Lady" in Lewis, ed., *Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography 1730-1860*, I, 367-368.

¹¹ Cited Benjamin Ray Oliphint, "Horatius Bonar, 1808-1889: Hymn-writer, Theologian, Preacher, Churchman; A study of his religious thought and activity" (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1951), 6. For a copy of this thesis I am indebted to Mr. Leen J. van Valen of Dordrecht, Holland.

¹² Bonar, "Horatius Bonar and His Hymns", xxviii.

¹³ Oliphint, "Horatius Bonar", II-12.

¹⁴ Andrew A. Bonar, *The Life of Robert Murray M'Cheyne* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 35.

¹⁵ *Hymns by Horatius Bonar*, 207-208. Also see the discussion of Bonar's eschatology by David M. McIntyre in "The Second Advent" in *Memoir of Dr H. Bonar*, 45-52. For the broader development of premillennialism during the nineteenth century, see David Bebbington, "The Advent Hope in British Evangelicalism since 1800", *The Scottish Journal of Religious Studies*, 9, No.2 (Autumn 1988), 103-114.

¹⁶ See the paper in this issue by Clint Humfrey on this circle of friends.

¹⁷ Bonar recalled some of the details of this in the portion of an address he drew up for his jubilee as a minister: "Fragment", *Horatius Bonar, D.D.: A Memorial*, 90.

¹⁸ McKnight, "Horatius Bonar", 13-14.

¹⁹ "Fragment", *Horatius Bonar, D.D.: A Memorial*, 90.

²⁰ "Fragment", *Horatius Bonar, D.D.: A Memorial*, 91.

²¹ "Fragment", *Horatius Bonar, D.D.: A Memorial*, 91.

²² "His Reward is with him" in *Memories of Dr. Horatius Bonar*, 99-100.

²³ Cited Oliphint, "Horatius Bonar", 19-20.

²⁴ For a list of some of those written by Bonar, see "List of Writings by Dr. Horatius Bonar" in *Horatius Bonar, D.D.: A Memorial*, 107. For a brief discussion of these tracts, see D. C. MacNicol, "The Kelso Tracts" in *Memories of Dr Horatius Bonar*, 57-60.

²⁵ MacNicol, "Kelso Tracts" in *Memoir of Dr H. Bonar*, 57.

²⁶ It has recently been reprinted as *Night of Weeping: When God's Children Suffer* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 1999). For the main emphases of this section, I am indebted to Alister McGrath, *The Journey: A Pilgrim in the Lands of the Spirit* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 136-138.

²⁷ *Night of Weeping*, 36.

²⁸ *Night of Weeping*, 36-37.

²⁹ *Night of Weeping*, 39-41 (the quote is found on page 40).

³⁰ *Night of Weeping*, 145.

³¹ *Night of Weeping*, 154.

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³² *Night of Weeping*, 159.

³³ "Sermon" in *Horatius Bonar, D.D.: A Memorial*, 40.

³⁴ "Introduction" to *Words Old and New*, xvi.

³⁵ James M. Gordon can write: "Horatius Bonar's most enduring literary contribution is to be found in his better hymns" [*Evangelical Spirituality* (London: SPCK, 1991), 124].

³⁶ Bonar, "Horatius Bonar and his Hymns", x-xi.

³⁷ For the date, see Bonar, "Horatius Bonar and his Hymns", xii.

³⁸ *Hymns by Horatius Bonar*, 60-61.

³⁹ For the figure, see Bonar, "Horatius Bonar and his Hymns", xxxviii.

⁴⁰ For example, see J. R. Watson, *The English Hymn: A Critical and Historical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 502. For studies of his hymns, see James Bonar, "Bonar, Horatius" in John Julian, ed., *A Dictionary of Hymnology* (2nd ed.; London: John Murray, 1908), 161-162; H. C. G. Moule, "The Beauty and Spirituality of the Hymns" in *Memories of Dr Horatius Bonar*, 21-26; Bonar, "Horatius Bonar and his Hymns", v-xxxix; Gordon, *Evangelical Spirituality*, 121-147, *passim*; Watson, *English Hymn*, 502-507.

⁴¹ *Hymns by Horatius Bonar*, 50-51. For a devotional study of this hymn, see Frank Colquhoun, *More Preaching on Favourite Hymns: Further sermon outlines on selected hymns* (London: Mowbray, 1990), 45-48.

⁴² *Hymns by Horatius Bonar*, 233-235.

⁴³ For accounts of this revival, see Bonar, *Life of Robert Murray M'Cheyne*, 128-129, 133-144; Richard Owen Roberts, ed., *Scotland Saw His Glory: A History of Revivals In Scotland* (Wheaton, Illinois: International Awakening Press, 1995), 269-288.

⁴⁴ On this trip, see see Andrew A. Bonar and Robert Murray McCheyne, *Mission of Discovery*, ed. Allan M. Harman (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 1996). This book was originally published as *Narrative of a Mission of Inquiry to the Jews from the Church of Scotland* (1839). Apparently, when one of Bonar's old parishioners in Collace asked him how he would go to Palestine, Bonar told her that they would go by way of Egypt. Hearing this, she threw up her hands and exclaimed: "Oh, then, we'll no see him again for forty years"! (Harman, "Introduction to Bonar and McCheyne, *Mission of Discovery*, 4).

⁴⁵ "Introduction" to *Words Old and New*, xii.

⁴⁶ Stewart J. Brown, "The Ten Years' Conflict and the Disruption of 1834" in his and Michael Fry, ed., *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 2.

⁴⁷ *Can We Remain in the Church?* (Kelso, 1843), 1-2.

⁴⁸ Oliphint, "Horatius Bonar", 21.

⁴⁹ J. D. Douglas, "Horatius Bonar: The Prince of Scottish Hymn Writers", *Decision*, Canadian Edition, 30, No. 7-8 (July-August 1989), 13.

⁵⁰ McKnight, "Horatius Bonar", 19.

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⁵¹ Oliphint, "Horatius Bonar", 29.

⁵² Bonar was "one of the last among notable Edinburgh preachers to conduct services in the open air, and this he frequently did on a Sunday in addition to the regular work for his congregation" ("Bonar, Horatius", *Dictionary of National Biography*, XXII, Supplement, 231).

⁵³ "Fragment", *Horatius Bonar, D.D.: A Memorial*, 93.

⁵⁴ "Preface" to his ed., *Catechisms of the Scottish Reformation* (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1866), v.

⁵⁵ J. W. Colenso (1814-1883), Bishop of Natal, was a theological liberal whose 1861 commentary on Romans denied eternal punishment as well as undermining other aspects of Christian orthodoxy. He was eventually excommunicated by the Anglican Church.

⁵⁶ "Preface" to his ed., *Catechisms of the Scottish Reformation*, xxxiii-xxxiv, n.*. Similar points are made in his *Our Ministry: How It Touches the Questions of the Age* (Edinburgh: MacNiven & Wallace, 1883).

⁵⁷ *God's Way of Holiness* (Repr. Welwyn, Hertfordshire: Evangelical Press, 1979), 4. I am indebted for this point to Gordon, *Evangelical Spirituality*, 136. See also Gordon's discussion of this aspect of Bonar's thought in *Evangelical Spirituality*, 134-137.

⁵⁸ Not much is known about Wilcox, but see Thomas Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists* (London, 1740), III, 101; Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists* (London, 1814), II, 465.

⁵⁹ The edition used is that recently published by the Chapel Library in Pensacola, Florida: Horatius Bonar, "Preface" to Thomas Wilcox and his, *Christ is All* (Pensacola, Florida: Chapel Library, n.d.), 2-15. There are also twenty-five notes by Bonar in this edition.

⁶⁰ "Preface", 2.

⁶¹ "Preface", 2.

⁶² "Preface", 2.

⁶³ "Preface", 3.

⁶⁴ "Preface", 4.

⁶⁵ *Hymns by Horatius Bonar*, 218, 219.

⁶⁶ *The Everlasting Righteousness* (1874 ed.; repr. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1993), 80, 112-113.

⁶⁷ *Christ is All*, 17-18, n.6.

⁶⁸ "Preface", 6.

⁶⁹ *Hymns by Horatius Bonar*, 51-52.

⁷⁰ "Preface", 7-8.

⁷¹ "Here, O my Lord, I see Thee face to face" in *Hymns by Horatius Bonar*, 234.

⁷² "Preface", 8.

⁷³ *God's Way of Peace* (Repr. Darlington, Co. Durham: Evangelical Press, 1968), 102.

⁷⁴ "Preface", 8.

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⁷⁵ "The Glory to be Revealed", *The Christian Treasury* (1864), 577-578. I owe this reference to the kindness of Darrin Brooker of Oakville, Ontario, who loaned me the use of this volume of *The Christian Treasury*.

⁷⁶ "Preface", 8-10.

⁷⁷ "Preface", 10, 11.

⁷⁸ "Preface", 12-15.

⁷⁹ *Hymns by Horatius Bonar*, 101.

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