

## William Chalmers Burns (1815-1868)

### Pioneer to Chinese Peoples



William was born the third son of a Church of Scotland minister. Both his parents were godly people. At school he preferred sports to study. He rarely read anything except Pilgrim's Progress and a book about the great Scottish hero William Wallace. In his teens he wanted to be a farmer but his father sent him to Aberdeen Grammar School. There he excelled academically and entered the University of Aberdeen hoping to go into the legal profession remarking that he "saw lawyers rich with fine houses!" After graduating he moved to Edinburgh to become an articled clerk.

Soon after arriving in Edinburgh he said: **"An arrow from the quiver of the King was shot by His Almighty Sovereign hand through my heart, though it was hard enough to resist all inferior means of salvation and the Spirit of God shone with full light upon the glory of Jesus as Saviour for such as I was."**

William was saved in January 1832. He switched from law to divinity – preparing himself for the pastorate. He studied divinity at Glasgow University. He was a founder member of Glasgow University Students' Missionary Society. On graduating in the winter of 1837/38, he applied to the church's India Committee indicating his willingness to go as a missionary to Hindustan if they considered him qualified.

A proposal was made that William should fulfil an assignment in Canada at St Johns, New Brunswick and then go from America directly to India. The India Committee did not agree to this plan. William was never to go to India. His passion to reach those who have never had a chance to hear the Gospel still burned brightly.

In July 1839 he received a call from the Jewish Committee asking him to go to Aden and Arabia. He felt that for the time being he must stay and complete the work God had given him to do in Scotland and so he declined.

The great Robert Murray McCheyne from Dundee asked William to take his place while he went on a trip to Palestine. Before going to Dundee William helped his father in preaching in his parish of Kilsyth and during this period a remarkable revival began in that parish. He moved to St. Peter's, Dundee in April 1839. As soon as he began to preach his spiritual anointing was felt. Crowds flocked to the church. His life was steeped in prayer.

Revival continued in Kilsyth and in Dundee. Congregations grew. At one meeting he preached for two hours from Isaiah 54:5 to over 10,000 people. William was 24 years old. There were all night prayer meetings. A report said, "People began to melt before the Lord". There was a flood of those wanting to repent and get right with God. The revival spread to other parts of Scotland. William was asked to preach in many places. As he says, he received **"much assistance from the Holy Spirit"**.

It was clear to evangelical ministers in Scotland that this was an unusual outpouring of the Spirit of God. William was asked to go to preach in Newcastle in the north of England. Immense crowds gathered. Many were angry and threatened physical violence. Stones and manure were thrown at William as he preached, but God's presence was evident. The crowd quietened and a sense of great solemnity prevailed. A great revival broke out in Newcastle and nearby Sunderland. Blessing also attended meetings in Dublin, Ireland.

The fulfilment of William's call to the "Regions Beyond" was deferred nine years while he completed the task God had given to him in Scotland/England.

In August 1844 William received a pressing invitation to visit Canada. He stayed there for two years taking the opportunity to brush up on his French in order to reach that section of the population. He returned to Glasgow in September 1846. On his return he had a strong sense that his work for God in the British Isles was at an end. He was now ready for his next Divine Assignment.



William was finally ordained in 1847 in the same church that had sent out Robert Morrison as the first Protestant missionary to China in 1807. Morrison had studied medicine and astronomy and had learned the Chinese language from Chinese living in London. He had been sent out by the London Missionary Society. On arrival in Canton, south-east China, the East India Company had employed him as a translator thus protecting him from deportation.

At his ordination/commissioning Dr Patterson exhorted him as follows:

**"Go forth then in His strength. Remember that God has given the heathen to His Son for an inheritance. Remember that Jesus has promised to be with you always - even to the end of the world."**

William was told to wait for the Brigantine Mary Bannatyne to reach Portsmouth. On June 8 he received an urgent message to get to Portsmouth as fast as possible. A favourable wind had sprung up. He must hurry to get there before she sailed. He sailed for China on June 9, 1847 and arrived in Hong Kong on November 13<sup>th</sup>. The journey had taken just over five months.

The early pioneer to China, Robert Morrison, had arrived in Macau in September 1807. He had compiled a dictionary of Chinese and with the help of William Milne he had translated the whole of the Bible into Chinese. He died in 1834. After his death the ports of Canton, Amoy, Foochow, Ning-po and Shanghai were opened to foreigners due to the Treaty of Nanking (1842) and Hong Kong was ceded to Great Britain. By the time William reached China there were about fifty missionaries in these six centres.

William gave himself to the study of Chinese. He moved out of the ex-patriate quarters to live among the Chinese. He started a small school – about fifteen students – to soak himself in the dialect. He had three basic prayer goals:

- fluency to preach in Chinese
- access into inland China
- openness in people's hearts to the truth about the Lord Jesus

In February 1849 William crossed over to the mainland and began itinerant evangelism with two Chinese assistants. He went from village to village staying a few days in each. Usually they had an invitation to the village. Every few months he returned briefly to Hong Kong and then went back to itinerant evangelism on the mainland. Some people were hostile and drove him away. He was robbed of all but the clothes he was wearing.

For sixteen months he worked in Canton. He seldom lacked hearers but his message didn't reach people's hearts. Still he went on sowing in hope. In June 1851 he moved up the coast to Amoy. This involved a change of dialect from Cantonese. By February 1852 he was preaching regularly in the open air in Amoy. He began itinerant evangelism in the surrounding villages to large crowds – often 3,000 people. There was usually a friendly welcome. William realised he needed help. He sent his entire year's salary back to Scotland. The head of the mission remarked, **"Surely that field is ripe unto harvest when the reaper sends home his own wages to fetch out another labourer!"**

William also worked on the translation of Pilgrim's Progress in Chinese. He was fascinated that John Bunyan's work was so effective in communicating to the Chinese mind. He put together a Chinese hymnbook. His chief delight was always open-air evangelism with a small team of Chinese evangelists. In 1854 he began to see regular conversions. In moving on, William left two Chinese Christians to disciple the new believers. In one place a church of twenty was birthed.

In 1855 William made Shanghai his base. He started a waterborne ministry up and down the rivers and canals preaching in the open air and distributing Scriptures in what was called **'The Million Testament Scheme'**. In January 1856 he met the newly arrived Hudson Taylor. Of this meeting he wrote, **"It is now 41 days since I left Shanghai on this last occasion. An excellent young**

English missionary, Mr Taylor of the Chinese Evangelisation Society, has been my companion during these weeks – he in his boat and I in mine – and we have experienced much mercy and on some occasions considerable assistance in our work.”

William further comments, “Four weeks ago on December 29<sup>th</sup>. I put on the Chinese dress which I am now wearing. Mr Taylor made this change a few months before and I found that in consequence he was so much less incommoded in preaching etc. by the crowd, that I concluded it was my duty to follow his example.”

So William and Hudson went out preaching from village to village. Both were dressed as Chinese and had a team of Chinese evangelists with them. William went further and further inland. At one place his team was arrested for selling a large quantity of books and for open air preaching. The magistrate required them to ‘kowtow’ and then remain on their knees for questioning. William solemnly and respectfully refused saying he would go down on one knee as he would to a sovereign, but he would only go down on two knees and ‘kowtow’ to the King of Kings – the Lord Jesus.

The magistrate had no foreigner. His speech, actions were just like a shaven head and his hair. He called himself Pin Wei 42 years old by now and a teacher of the religion exhorted his fellow men. His Chinese colleagues and tortured. William Canton at government his Bibles and other a month to get to Canton were soon distributed.



HMS *Cornwallis* saluting the conclusion of the Treaty of Nanking

idea William was a appearance and Chinese – with a plaited in a queue. Lin. William was stated that he was of Jesus. He to do good deeds. were imprisoned was sent to expense with all books. It took over and his Bibles

From 1857-58 Britain and China were at war and this restricted his inland journeys. After the war William was able to return to visit some of the small house churches that had emerged from his earlier ministry trips. These visits were filled with joy at how some had progressed and with sorrow since some needed discipline. He worked hard at introducing colloquial hymn singing.

Chinese Christians were suffering much persecution – being robbed, rice fields being destroyed, being banned from the village well and sometimes enduring physical violence. In the end the missionaries decided William should go to Peking to secure a general and permanent settlement of the rights of Christians in China. He failed in this, but he made an extremely good case before the authorities. He would no doubt have made a great lawyer. Again he didn’t live with the missionaries and the foreign community but lived as a Chinese in a small rented house.

While in Peking he wrote 50 hymns in Mandarin and re-translated Pilgrim’s Progress into Mandarin. He also produced a translation of the Psalms directly from the Hebrew into Mandarin in a way to retain the poetic form so it would be easier to memorize. He had quite a preaching ministry. When his legal appeal for Chinese Christians failed and since Peking was well occupied with missionaries, William left and began itinerant preaching tours. It was the autumn of 1867. He travelled to Tientsin and then up to Niew Chwang in Manchuria. It was cold that winter.

On January 15<sup>th</sup> 1868 William wrote to his mother, “At the end of last year I got a severe chill which has not yet left the system, producing chilliness and fever every night and for the last two nights this has been followed by perspiration which rapidly diminishes the strength. Unless it should please God to rebuke the disease, it is evident what the end must soon be and I write these lines beforehand to say that I am happy and ready through the abounding grace of God either to live or to die. May the God of all consolation comfort you when the tidings of my decease shall reach you and through the redeeming blood of Jesus

**may we meet with joy before the throne above!"**

He died on April 4<sup>th</sup> 1868 while in Niew Chwang (now called Yingkou).

William was primarily a gifted evangelist. He had a deep conviction that new believers received into their lives what he called **"The whole Christ"** who was not only Saviour but also Lord. He had a phrase **"No cross – no crown"** that summarised discipling new believers. There had been a 9-year delay in Scotland where he was God's instrument in bringing in the Revival before being sent to China. On arrival in China he adapted readily from a reaper to a sower.

He became an effective sower and even began to reap some of what he had sowed. But his main work in twenty years in China was preparing a highway for our God – sowing by voice and by pen. He died in a "frontier situation" where the Gospel had not been preached before.

William demonstrated:

- Great application to study of the language (several dialects)
- Great identification in dress and other ways with the Chinese people
- Great moral courage that made him oblivious to any danger
- Outspokenness on social questions like the opium trade and the export of Chinese coolies (a form of slavery)
- A refusal to identify himself with British authority – great pressure was put on him to be a chaplain to British people in the five settlements
- An indifference to money matters and a determination to live a simple lifestyle

His model was the Apostle Paul. He remained single for the Kingdom's sake. He was both a scholar and a forceful preacher. He regarded evangelism and church planting as paramount. His greatest delight was to blaze a trail over fresh horizons. He proclaimed the whole council of God. William's trumpet gave no uncertain sound.

A fellow missionary on home leave was once asked if he knew William Burns. **"Know him, Sir!"** this man exclaimed with pardonable hyperbole. **"All China knows him! He is the holiest man alive!"**

**"Being dead, he yet speaks"** calling an ease-loving, self-pleasing generation to **"Have done with lesser things"** and **"give heart and soul and mind and strength to serve the King of Kings"**.



The harvest is sure!

