

Ross , Donald Bio

by John Bjorlie

Donald Ross was a Scottish evangelist who established the North East Coast Mission and later ministered in the US and Canada, establishing assemblies and Bible conferences and leaving a lasting legacy of evangelism and church planting.

Scripture: Acts 16:1

Topics: "Evangelism", "Faithfulness"

Description

John Bjorlie preaches about the life and ministry of Donald Ross, a dedicated evangelist who faced challenges and opposition in his journey to spread the gospel. Ross, born in Scotland in 1823, was a man of prayer and conviction, leaving the Church of Scotland to start the North East Coast Mission and later the Northern Evangelistic Association. He emphasized the importance of godly preachers and the need for authenticity and dedication in serving the Lord. Ross' unwavering faith led him to make bold decisions, including separating from denominations and embracing believer's baptism, impacting many lives through his evangelistic efforts in Scotland, the United States, and Canada.

Transcript

As a youth, Donald was "as proud as a peacock, and as empty as a drum," and yet he "said" prayers night and morning, for fear that God would smite him if he didn't. Then one day while Ross was walking alone among the mountain heather, returning home after visiting a dying brother, he saw the light of the gospel in John 18:8: "If ye seek Me, let these go their way."

Ross was born in Rosshire, Scotland in 1823. Twice each day his God-fearing parents gathered the family to read Scripture and pray for God's blessing. Ross was the fruit of their prayers. For the first five years following his conversion, Ross was a member of the Church of Scotland. He left during what was later known as "The Disruption of 1843," when Thomas Chalmers split from the mainstream Presbyterians to start the Free Church of Scotland.

In 1847, Donald married Margaret Leslie. He moved his new family to Edinburgh a few years later. There Donald and Margaret heard Mr. Tasker ministering God's Word. After work, he engaged in evangelistic work. It was during this time that Tasker urged Ross to superintend a mission to coal miners in Lanarkshire. "This," say his biographers, "he positively refused to do--not from unwillingness to serve the Lord with all his might--but because he did not wish to be dependent on preaching for his support." But Ross changed his mind a while later, when his employer terminated his position, He did not know how to

preach. Tasker said, "You preach into your own heart, and you will be surprised how many other hearts your preaching will fit." And so it was that Ross, from 1858 to 1860 preached the gospel to the miners.

In 1859, Thomas Rosie began a gospel outreach called the "North East Coast Mission" to reach the 57 Scottish fishing villages between Thurso in the north down to Ferryden in the south. From these villages, the fishermen sailed and rowed boats that were little improved from previous centuries. Their livelihood was always tough, and occasionally dangerous. The men who would preach Christ among these fishermen, said Rosie, needed to be no-nonsense people.

Rosie asked Ross to be his secretary and superintendent of The North East Coast Mission. The Mission had no money and little manpower. So Ross started from the ground up, making the city of Aberdeen his headquarters.

In his first annual report for the Mission, Ross wrote, "At Bervie, Gourdon, Downes, Cove, St. Comb's, Inverallochy, Cairnbulg and Broadsea, the blessing has descended. Waters have broken out in the wilderness and streams in the desert." Ross soon had a band of twenty aggressive evangelists helping him in the work. Those interested in joining the Mission had to pass an interview with Ross. He asked all candidates the same opening question: "When and where were you born again?" If the candidate could not give an immediate, certain answer, the interview ended. Ross had high standards for his preachers. "Were they godly? Had their preaching 'teeth'? Had they the power of God with it?" If a man's preaching lacked "the revival fire" it was "neither good for man nor beast." Of weak preaching, Ross would remark, "It wouldn't kill a mosquito," and of weak preachers, "He has not the smell of God." He talked about "feeling a preacher's pulse" by his prayers, and enjoyed hearing a message that "shaved close."

John Ritchie, one of Ross' biographers, sums up Ross' view on preaching and preachers: "It is necessary to emphasize the need of godly care in encouraging or authenticating as preachers all who may wish to leave their employment to go out as evangelists or missionaries at home or abroad, lest those uncalled and unsent, be helped into a path that they have neither gift nor grace to fill. The Scriptural principle in all such public service is, 'Let these first be proved' (1 Tim. 3:10), which can be best done in the sphere in which they live by those who see their lives and have their testimony and service before them from day to day. Being 'well spoken of' (Acts 16:1-2) by those who know them best, and with the fellowship of the assembly in which they are (Acts 13:1-4), they may then be heartily commended to the Lord, and go forth followed by the prayers of His people. Very different is the not uncommon practice of restive, often unspiritual young men, who have no great love for honest labour 'becoming evangelists,' and setting forth in their self-chosen path, only to do mischief, until they break down and dishonour the Name of the Lord."

Ross' letters to younger workers were sometimes harsh. But if he saw the right attitude, he became a father to them. John Campbell, James Dewar, John Gill, Donald Munro, and John Smith all had Ross as their mentor. Ross said, "All were not equal in gifts and graces, but there were in the Mission the choicest spirits and most devoted men we ever met--godly, self-denying, and successful."

From 1859 until 1870, a great reaping of souls occurred, especially in the villages along the Moray Firth and the Aberdeenshire coast. The work in Ferryden, Cairnbulg and Inverallochy was remarkable. In 1869 at Footdee "the power of God was so manifest, that for many weeks no fishing boats went to sea. Meetings were continued day and night." "Men, women, and children were seen at all times of the day dropping on their knees--on the snow-covered ground, crying for mercy." Six hundred professed to be saved at Footdee. The evangelists did not know of any holdouts in the town.

Alexander Marshall said, "Duncan Matheson and Donald Ross gathered numerous sheaves of golden grain for the Lord of the harvest. Duncan Matheson and Donald Ross were men of kindred spirits, and were splendid Gospel pioneers. Matheson spoke of his friend as 'that Caledonian warrior.'" Matheson (1824-1869) was Ross' mentor, and closest friend.

Matheson called him "the walking Shorter Catechism" and would say, "I have given you the stories; he will give you the doctrine. His name is Donald Ross."

Ross always spoke of him as "dear Duncan Matheson." They were both Presbyterians, and Matheson sympathized with Ross' grief over the clergymen. But until his death in 1869, he advised Ross to endure the Free Church denomination. Ross said, "As a rule, we could get the people of the coast to hear us, but this aroused the jealousy of the clergy, to a fearful extent in some cases. Then their complaints poured into headquarters of the sayings and doings of the missionaries in their parishes and districts." As long as drunkards were reformed and church membership increased, Ross' society was a true "auxiliary of the church."

But Ross was not content to only warn the disreputable. He wrote, "Gradually it became our settled conviction that the clergy were the greatest hindrances in the country to the people's salvation. This staggered us, and we often asked ourselves--'Can this be they that Christ ordered?' Another thing was made plain to us then, that is, that nearly all the church members in the Established Church were absolutely unconverted, and that only a sprinkling of the Free Church people were born again. We were convinced that something was radically wrong with the churches. For ourselves we were beginning to think over the question whether it was our duty to have no more fellowship with that which was simply an agency for the devil to deceive souls. This gradually ripened into positive conviction and led to the first steps on the way to a complete separation."

As Ross searched his Bible, he decided to end his service in the North East Coast Mission. In 1870, he started the Northern Evangelistic Association. Some evangelists joined him, but soon afterwards that society dissolved, and Ross ceased being connected with any society or denomination. This was a frightening step for a husband and father. He knew it might bring privation and loneliness. But the thing he feared more than the frown of his peers was the frown of God. Was he a clean vessel? He felt sure that if he walked with God, "there would be porridge in the bowl." These situations helped him see that God does not measure out His grace in ounces and small measures. "No, no;" Ross said, "God is a great God, and must act like Himself in all the greatness of His character."

During the summer of 1870, Ross studied baptism. "What about baptism?" he asked himself. "If you saw it in the Word of God, would you be willing to obey?" Ross had been a proponent of infant sprinkling. All his thirteen children were "christened." But now his Bible reading did not back up his opinion. And so it was that, not long afterwards, Ross was baptized in the River Dee at five o'clock on a Saturday morning, at the Public Baths in Crooked Lane, Aberdeen. His obedience influenced many others, and the baths were used to baptize large numbers of believers for many Lord's Days following. That summer many of Ross' religious prejudices were overturned.

At this time, a Mr. McIntosh, a licensed minister in the Free Church, was commissioned to warn the people about this heretical movement. A booklet, *The New Prophets*, was published and widely circulated. The newspapers echoed the misrepresentations in the booklet, and the villages around Aberdeenshire received such slanderous reports that the evangelists needed next to no advertising for their meetings.

Ross and his co-workers and converts were gradually "squeezed out."

In 1871, he started a monthly paper, the Northern Evangelist and Intelligencer, afterwards called the Northern Witness. After 1888, it became The Witness, and had a worldwide circulation of 30,000 monthly. In August of 1871, he was invited to the shipbuilding town of Jarrow to "sound an alarm."

There he met James McGregor, an upstanding churchgoer who had for five years been "troubled about his soul." Ross listened at length while McGregor discussed his many merits. Then interrupted, "James, if that is all you have, you may consider yourself on the road to hell." James was the first one to be saved that fall.

By November of 1871, "the table of the Lord was spread in the simplicity of early times." James Campbell joined the meeting at that time. "It was a beautiful sight to us indeed. We had never heard of such a meeting until we saw it with our own eyes." Several New Testament styled gatherings sprang up. Ross had his mandate: Preach the gospel, baptize, and see the saints gathered into assemblies. Ross did not realize the reaction these new steps would bring. Under pressure, Ross moved his family to Edinburgh, where "the work was carried on amidst much to discouragement."

In 1876, he visited the United States. He often said the Lord never got anything out of him except by squeezing. God squeezed him into repentance, squeezed him into going into the Lord's work among the coal miners, squeezed him out of the Free Church, and now squeezed him out of Scotland into America. Upon his arrival, Ross evangelized in Boston, New York and in country districts in Canada. In 1879, he moved his family to Chicago. There he and three other men began to remember the Lord in the breaking of bread in a tent, also used for evangelistic purposes. That assembly grew so that several others in the Chicago area hived off from it.

Caleb Jason Baker worked with Ross in planning the first Chicago area Bible conference with Ross. Baker cautioned Ross about the expense of the conference, but Ross was undaunted. Baker described Ross' reaction: "'Oh,' he said, 'do it for God, man; do it for God.' 'Do you mean,' I said, 'that you would not charge anything?' 'That is just what I mean,' he replied. 'But,' I said, 'This would cost about \$200 for the four days.' His reply was, 'I never knew anything undertaken for God in God's way, but He would look after the expense. Invite everyone to come; let there be the regular collection at the breaking of bread, and let each give as the Lord may lead.' This was somewhat startling to me, and I said I would have to pray and think more about it before I could decide. I did pray, and it seemed to me that it would be honoring to God, and a great blessing to the poor of the flock...the expenses were \$199, but the collection was \$204. Since then, all, or nearly all, of the numerous conferences on this western continent have been run on this plan, and always with the most satisfactory results."

While in Chicago, Ross started a tract depot in his own house, keeping a stock of tracts, Bibles, and books for Christians. For some twenty years he issued the monthly magazine, Our Record, and for a number of years edited a gospel paper.

In 1887, he visited California with James Goodfellow to labor in San Francisco and Oakland in tent meetings and home visitation. By the end of that summer, fifteen were baptized and an assembly of thirty begun. That October they held their first Annual Bible Conference. Donald Munro often spoke at that conference, and during one visit had a direct hand in leading to Christ a teenager named Henry Allan Ironside.

In 1894, Ross made Kansas City his base. From there his gospel campaigns ranged in all directions. He wrote, edited periodicals, and preached there until 1901 when he returned to Chicago, to be with his son C. W. Ross.

Alexander Marshall described Ross "as essentially a gospel preacher. He was more than a preacher and an exhorter. He was a laborer, and he toiled for the perishing; at fairs and races, in tents and halls, in barns and chapels, in music halls and theaters, in cottages and in the open air, he sounded out the wondrous story." Ross was fearless. He led by example. With his co-workers, Campbell, Gill, Marshall, Munro, and Smith, they saw about 400 assemblies established in the US and Canada.

Ross moved to Savannah, GA, shortly before he was promoted to higher service on February, 13, 1903. Near the end, he said: "I will be eighty on the 11th February, and if I had other eighty before me I would spend them in this gospel of God's grace. There is no other work of such importance in the whole world. All other investments amount to nothing compared with this."

Materials for this article taken from:

1. Hy. Pickering, Chief Men Among the Brethren, Loizeaux
2. C. W. Ross editor, Donald Ross, Gospel Tract Publ.
3. J. Ritchie editor, Donald Munro, GTP
4. J. Ritchie editor, James Campbell, GTP

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-bjorlie/ross-donald-bio/>

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