

6-1-1949

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F. R. Webber

*Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*

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### Recommended Citation

Webber, F. R. (1949) "Thomas Guthrie, Apostle to the Slums," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 20, Article 35.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol20/iss1/35>

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## Thomas Guthrie, Apostle to the Slums

By F. R. WEBBER

Everybody is aware that Dr. Thomas Guthrie was one of the most noted pulpit orators of the nineteenth century, but the fact is often overlooked that most of his long life was devoted to congregational work in the worst of Edinburgh's slums. He built a spacious church there and a parochial school; and in that district his well-known sermons were preached. They fill most of the sixteen volumes of his collected works, and very few sermon books have enjoyed so large a circulation.

Thomas Guthrie was born in 1803 at Brechin, Forfarshire, on Scotland's east coast. His father was a prosperous merchant and a city official, well able to give his thirteen children a good education. The elder Guthrie was a devout man, but unfortunately he was devoted to the State Church (Presbyterian), which had long been under the control of the rationalistic Moderate party. It was otherwise with Thomas Guthrie's mother. She decided that the Christless sermons to which she was compelled to listen in the parish church were very poor pabulum for her soul, and, being a woman of true Scottish determination, she took the older children and became identified with the little Burgher, or Secession, chapel not far away, where a more or less obscure dissenting clergyman preached the great doctrines of redemption as he understood them.

In the Guthrie household the strictest standards of old-fashioned piety prevailed. The family gathered morning and evening, and the elder Guthrie read his "chapter" and offered a lengthy prayer in true Scottish fashion. On Sunday they attended their respective kirks, morning and afternoon. The remainder of the day was spent in religious pursuits, after the admirable fashion of those days. The children studied their *Shorter Catechism* and recited their lessons to their father. The parents and the older children read the well-worn, leather-bound books that were to be found on the corner shelf in every respectable home. There was the Bible, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Thomas Boston's *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State*, and the standard works of Scotland's devotional writers — pietistic, no doubt, and decidedly Calvinistic,

[408]

yet always laying utmost stress upon rugged honesty and uprightness of life. Metrical Psalms were memorized and sung at family devotions, but secular psalms were absolutely forbidden on the so-called Sabbath.

At a very tender age Thomas Guthrie was placed in a school kept by a devout man who augmented his modest salary by means of a hand loom which stood in one corner of the room. During the study periods he sat at his loom, and lessons were learned to the click of the wooden shuttle. Guthrie's first textbook was the Book of Proverbs. "That book is without a rival for beginners," he declared half a century later, "containing quite a repertory of monosyllables and pure Saxon, English undefiled. Take this passage, for example, where, with one exception, every word is formed of a single syllable and belongs to the Saxon tongue: '*Train* up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not *depart* from it.' What a contrast to the silly trash of modern schoolbooks for beginners, with such sentences as, 'Tom has a dog'; 'The cat is good'; 'the cow has a calf.' While learning the art of reading by the Book of Proverbs we had our minds stored with the highest moral truths; and by sage advices applicable to all ages and departments of life, the branch while it was supple received a bent in a direction highly favourable to future well-doing and success in life. The patience, prudence, foresight and economy which used to characterize Scotsmen — giving occasion to the saying, 'a canny Scot' — and by which they were so often able to rise in the world and distance all competitors in the race of life — was to a large extent due to their being thus engrained in youth and childhood with the practical wisdom enshrined in the Book of Proverbs."<sup>1</sup> Thomas Guthrie's next school was the parochial school of the local anti-Burgher congregation, where no less a man than Dr. Thomas M'Crie, the eminent church historian, had once been teacher.

Guthrie entered Edinburgh University at the early age of twelve. He was a good student, but the university records show that he was twice disciplined because of his readiness to fight. Before he was fifteen, he was six feet three inches tall. His broad Forfarshire "Doric" brogue caused the other boys to

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<sup>1</sup> *Autobiography of Thomas Guthrie, D.D., and Memoir by His Sons* (London and New York, 1874), Vol. 1, pp. 28—29.

ridicule him, and this led to frequent and violent scenes where two boys, each stripped to the waist, settled the argument with their fists, as the others formed a ring about them and looked on. Guthrie's theological training was received in the Divinity Hall of Edinburgh University. He walked halfway across the city late at night, year after year, taking lessons in public speaking from a qualified teacher. After four years of college work and four additional years of theological study he was graduated at the age of 20, but was refused a license to preach because of his youth. He returned to the University for additional study.

Guthrie was licensed to preach in 1825 and was offered a large, prosperous congregation. He was told plainly that, before accepting the appointment, he must go to St. Andrews and pay his respects to Dr. Nicol, an influential leader of the Moderate party, then in control of the State Church. Guthrie refused emphatically to do this, for he had learned to know and detest the Moderates because of their liberalistic views. His refusal caused the Moderates to enroll his name, figuratively, in their Black Book; and for the next five years he waited in vain for a congregation. He studied for a time at the famous Sorbonne in Paris. Returning to Scotland, he succeeded his brother as manager of a local bank, filling this position with credit for two years or so.

It was not until 1830 that he received a call, and then only through the patient efforts of an influential friend of the family. Guthrie was compelled to pay sixty pounds for this appointment, half of which went to the crown, and half of which was used by the Moderates for a dinner to the presbytery, at which wine flowed freely and at least one clergyman became very drunk.

The congregation was in the little village of Arbirlot and was composed of farmers and a few village weavers. The church was in bad repair, and its floor was merely tamped clay. The manse, as it is called in Presbyterian circles, was hardly fit for human habitation. Guthrie entered upon his work with zeal. He organized catechetical classes for children and a Sunday afternoon class for young people. The latter became so popular that people from the congregation in the next village walked four miles to attend it. He opened a lending library; and when the farmers came for books, he led the

conversation adroitly into religious channels. James McCosh, later the well-known president of Princeton University, was his nearest neighbor. The Rev. J. C. Burns tells us that Guthrie had provided himself with excellent critical and devotional commentaries, yet he prepared his sermons with but two books in addition to his Bible. These were Cruden's *Concordance* and Dr. Thomas Chalmers' *Scripture References*.<sup>2</sup>

During his student days in Edinburgh, Guthrie had heard all the noted preachers of that city, including Dr. Andrew Thomson, the great evangelical leader, then pastor of Saint George's, the domed church at the end of George Street. He had observed that many a fine sermon may be reduced to feebleness by a delivery lacking in animation, while many a superficial sermon may sound very convincing because of an impressive delivery. Guthrie determined to prepare his sermons with utmost care and to write out every sermon in full. Opposite each page of manuscript he left a blank page. He made a painstaking study of the style of the Old Testament Prophets, of the Lord Jesus Christ, and of the Apostles, and he strove, as far as possible, to imitate their style of simple, direct statement. He revised each sermon again and again, seeking to express simple thoughts in clear, pithy language. Dr. McCosh often found him, late Saturday night, recasting his finished sermon on the blank page opposite each page of writing. On Sunday he preached without manuscript or notes. His sermons were lengthy, but he usually allowed the congregation to sing a metrical Psalm between the parts of the sermon.

It was in his afternoon catechetical hours for young people that he developed the pictorial style of preaching for which he became famous. The young people and their parents were questioned, at this afternoon service, on some section of the *Larger Catechism*. Then, after singing a metrical Psalm, the morning sermon was taken up, point by point, and the young people questioned in regard to it. Guthrie amplified the morning sermon by means of striking illustrations which he did not feel free to use in the course of his morning sermon. These were drawn from the daily lives of the people. One of his well-known illustrations is that of the cabin boy in a great storm at sea. When asked how he could be so cheerful

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<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 319.

when all others were so terrified, he led the inquirer to a bulkhead door, pointed to a dim light on the bridge, and said, "That is my own father at the helm, sir." Guthrie used this story with great skill in impressing upon his young people that there is nothing to fear so long as Jesus Christ directs the ship of the Kirk through troubled waters. During his seven years at Arbirlot, Guthrie had the satisfaction of seeing all but three of the thousand people in and near the village become regular church attendants. During his pastorate but one crime was committed in the village and its vicinity.

Thomas Guthrie was 27 years old when he became pastor of Arbirlot, and at the age of 34 his fame as a preacher had reached distant Edinburgh. Old Greyfriars had become vacant. It was one of the most historic and most influential churches of the city, and on a flat tombstone in its churchyard the National Covenant had been signed many years before. Of the eleven candidates Guthrie was chosen by the city magistrates. He accepted the call only on condition that he be allowed to devote his energies to the people of the slums.

If the reader has visited Edinburgh, he may remember the two churches, Old Greyfriars and New Greyfriars, which stand end to end in a little lane that leads from the Grassmarket to George IV Bridge. Under the spiritual care of Thomas Guthrie and an associate pastor were 50,000 people who resided within the limits of the parish and were theoretically affiliated with the church. Guthrie created a sensation from the start. Every seat, every gallery, every aisle, was crowded to capacity, and long queues waited outside hoping that somebody might leave the church and that the police might allow another to go in and take his place. Affiliated with Old Greyfriars was Magdalene Chapel, where Guthrie preached in the afternoon to capacity congregations.

Guthrie had made it clear that he intended to devote his energies to the neglected people of the near-by slums. He called attention to the fact that a very eminent Edinburgh pastor of a former generation had made an annual visitation of the poorer parts of his parish. Pausing at the end of each narrow passageway, this clergyman (a Moderate) would lift an elegantly gloved hand to Heaven and exclaim piously, "Lord God, bless all the people who dwell in this wynd." Except for this token visitation the people were completely

neglected. Guthrie spent two or three years visiting those terrible wynds and closes, as the narrow alleyways are called. He found wretched people living in appalling circumstances. In a memorable sermon he describes the slums of his parish.<sup>3</sup> There were whole streets of what were once the magnificent homes of the rich, but now their great rooms were divided into small cubicles, in each one of which dwelt in utmost wretchedness a large family. Narrow passageways, sometimes but two or three feet wide, called wynds and closes, led to what was once the garden back of the rich man's home. Every available square foot of ground had been built up in brick tenements, often eight to ten stories high, and into most of the rooms of these the sun was never known to shine. The former gardens of the wealthy were set thick with these squalid tenements, and in them dwelt people whose poverty was almost beyond belief. In some cases both father and mother were drunkards, and their children were taught to steal in order that they might eat. Again, Mr. Guthrie found families of devout Christians whom sickness, accident, or unemployment had reduced to such a condition that they sold their home and moved to the slums, then sold their furniture, piece by piece, keeping at last only the family Bible, a few religious books, and their Sunday clothes. Continued misfortune, and children crying because of hunger, at last caused them to pawn the family Bible and their Sunday clothing, and then they quit attending church.

Mr. Guthrie had not been long in Edinburgh before he resolved to build a church and school in the Nether Bow and to put into operation Dr. Chalmers' territorial plan. Hitherto Edinburgh, which was overwhelmingly Presbyterian, had been divided into large parishes, in each of which were one or two pastors. Two men were expected to care for as many as 50,000 souls. Guthrie declared emphatically that no pastor can care properly for more than 1,000 souls. The Chalmers territorial plan called for the division of these large parishes into small territories and then for placing a number of elders and deacons in charge, working under direction of the pastor. Each elder or deacon was to have ten to twenty families under his immediate care, and each worker was obliged to visit every family once a week. Forty such trained elders and deacons

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<sup>3</sup> *The City; its Sins and Sorrows* (Edinburgh, 1857), pp. 51-80.

were assigned to a given territory, and each territory contained a large church and one or more parish schools. Chalmers and Guthrie were men of strong personality and determination, able to organize such a territorial plan, to keep it running smoothly, and to keep the elders and deacons at their tasks with no excuses.

In 1839, two years after Guthrie came to Edinburgh, the foundation stone of a new church was laid. It stands in Nether Bow, now known as Victoria Street. Unlike most Old World churches, this one included a basement, and in it Mr. Guthrie was preaching before the walls were completed overhead. The church was called St. John's, and late in 1840, when it was completed, Thomas Guthrie took charge of it as pastor. The church was seated for 1,000 people. Guthrie insisted that the 650 sittings on the main floor be free of pew rent and reserved for the poor. There are long galleries on each side wall and a gallery across the rear of the church. The 350 sittings in these galleries were rented to the well-to-do people who came from a distance to hear Guthrie preach. By renting 350 sittings to the wealthy, he was able to provide 650 free seats for the poor. In the basement of the church he started Edinburgh's first Ragged School, which differed from the usual type of parish school (of which the Presbyterians of Scotland had about one thousand at that time) in that it was a school for the homeless street Arabs who were so numerous in Edinburgh. It was a free school for those too poor to pay tuition and where the children were provided with free meals and warm clothing as well as religious and secular instruction.

The church was crowded from the start. People were turned away in numbers. So great was Mr. Guthrie's popularity as a pulpit orator that while he was engaged in the educational campaign previous to the Disruption of 1843, the people smuggled planks into the church during the week. Climbing to the open space between the suspended ceiling and the true roof, they laid these planks across the ceiling joists; and despite the watchful church officers, many people succeeded in scrambling up into this church attic, where they surrounded the ventilating grilles opening into the church below. There they were forced to remain until Mr. Guthrie and the elders and deacons were all out of the church at the



close of the service. This continued for some time, until it reached the ears of the city officials, who prohibited it because they feared, and rightly so, that the ceiling might give way under the weight of this invisible portion of the congregation.

Thomas Guthrie was to enjoy his new church for only three years. When the split in the State Church, known as the Disruption of 1843, took place,<sup>4</sup> it was Chalmers, Welsh, Guthrie, Candlish, Cunningham, and Gordon who led the movement. For weeks they went all through Scotland, holding mass meetings in every town and village. The burning question was whether a local congregation had a right to choose and call its own pastor, or whether this right could be claimed by an influential patron. Chalmers, Guthrie, Candlish, and their followers upheld the right of the congregation against the Moderates, who defended patronage. During this preliminary campaign Mr. Guthrie was asked to address a gathering at Strathbogie. When he arrived, he was handed a court order forbidding him to preach in any church, schoolhouse, or churchyard in the parish of Strathbogie. He announced a meeting in the open air; and putting the warrant under his foot, he spoke to a great gathering of people while the court officers looked on, powerless to stop him because the clerk of court had no authority to prohibit field preaching.

Thomas Guthrie was one of the six great leaders of the evangelical party who headed the solemn procession of 474 clergymen and many elders who filed out of the convention of the General Assembly on May 18, 1843, and made their way through cheering and weeping multitudes to Tanfield Hall,<sup>5</sup> where they at once organized the Free Church of Scotland and signed a deed of demission, severing all connection with the corrupt State Church of their time and relinquishing all claim to its property. In so doing they signed away their congregations, their incomes, and all claim to the churches, parochial schools, and manses. In Guthrie's case it meant giving up his new church and school; but he did not falter for a moment, nor did any of the 474 who withdrew that day.

In record time he found a new site close by, on the steep slope of Castle Hill. The great majority of his congregation

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<sup>4</sup> A more detailed account of the Disruption appeared in the June, 1947, issue of *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, pp. 418—422.

<sup>5</sup> *CONCORDIA THEOL. MONTHLY*, June, 1947, pp. 420—421.

withdrew with him; and in some manner, although a great many of them were from the poorest slums in Edinburgh, they raised the sum of 6,000 pounds, or about \$30,000, for a new church and school. In some manner Thomas Guthrie succeeded in building a simple but very substantial church and school for that sum. St. John's Free Church, as it was called, was a spacious building, seating 1,200, but it was quickly filled to capacity. There Dr. Guthrie labored among his people of the slums until shortly before his death, in the year 1873, when ill health compelled him to give up all but the lightest of duties. It was in Old Greyfriars, in St. John's, and in Free St. John's that most of his famous sermons were preached. He was a man of unlimited energy; for in addition to his labors in the slums of Cowgate and the task of raising funds and building a new church and school, he found time to engage in a speaking tour throughout Scotland. As a result of this tour he raised \$591,850 in order to provide the 474 Free Church pastors with manses, as they are called by the Presbyterians. This was remarkable, for the people of the new Free Church had just raised \$1,600,000 for 500 new church buildings, to say nothing of almost as many parochial schools and the imposing New College and its theological hall, which stand to this day at the end of the Mound, an artificial causeway connecting the Old Town and the New Town. As a result of a multitude of activities Dr. Guthrie developed a heart condition, and for two years it was feared that he would never preach again. From this time onward Dr. William Hanna, the author of the two-volume biography of Thomas Chalmers, was Guthrie's assistant at Free St. John's. With so faithful a helper, Guthrie continued his work from 1850 until 1864, when his worn-out condition compelled him, at the age of 61, to give up most of his work.

It was not until 1855 that the first of Dr. Guthrie's dozen or more books appeared. Until then he had published only his three pamphlets on Ragged Schools and a sermon or two. His first book, *The Gospel in Ezekiel*, has its shortcomings. In it, for example, he shows once more how difficult it is for the "reformed" type of mind to grasp such a truth as Baptismal regeneration. In his eagerness to warn his readers against the belief that a mere outward performance of Baptism will prove a guarantee of life and salvation, he comes

dangerously near to denying it entirely.<sup>6</sup> Despite its defects, this *Gospel in Ezekiel* became a best seller in Scotland and in America. Other books of sermons followed in rapid succession, for Guthrie was one of the few famous preachers who could write well as well as preach well.

Like the Fundamentalists of our own day, one cannot accept Dr. Guthrie without reservation. He preached Christ Crucified with singular clarity, and he declared in no uncertain terms that salvation flows entirely from divine grace, "without any merit on the part of the sinner to deserve it, and without any ability on his part to accomplish it," as Dr. Andrew Thomson so aptly expressed it.<sup>7</sup> One can only wish that Guthrie might have been equally clear in regard to other important truths of the Gospel of grace. If he could distinguish between objective and subjective justification, this is not clear in his sermons. His Calvinism is not of the old, harsh type. Hyper-Calvinists considered him liberal because he did not preach a limited Atonement. "John," he said in one of his sermons, "uses a very broad expression. 'Jesus Christ,' he says, 'is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.' The whole world—'Ah!' some would say, 'that is dangerous language.' It is God's language; John speaking as he was moved by the Holy Ghost. It throws a zone of mercy around the world. Perish the hand that would narrow it by a hair's breadth."<sup>8</sup>

Guthrie had, at least in his younger years, the Reformed conception of the divine obligation to keep the Sabbath; while his daily experiences in the Cowgate slums with thousands of drunken men and women caused him to preach fiery temperance sermons long before that had become a fashion in evangelical circles. One authority on the history of preaching, whose name we shall not mention, hails Dr. Guthrie as one of the nine representative preachers of modern times. Although admitting his greatness, yet this authority would have us believe that Guthrie was a man without theological depth, but clever enough to conceal his lack of deep thinking and close argumentation behind a series of

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 212—218.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Thomson, *Sermons and Sacramental Exhortations* (Edinburgh, 1831), p. 61.

<sup>8</sup> *Autobiography*, Vol. 2, p. 194.

dazzling word pictures and striking illustration. The real grievance of this critic seems to be that Dr. Guthrie, like Spurgeon, rejected the conclusions of the Higher Critics *in toto*. It is here that we find Guthrie's greatest glory. He has an admirable sermon on the inspiration of the Bible.<sup>9</sup> Even granting that he mistakes mere assertion for logical proof, yet that sermon, with the blemishes that one must admit that it contains, is one of the most ringing pleas in behalf of an un mutilated Bible that are to be found anywhere in Reformed circles. Call the sermon rhetorical if you will, and its oratory of the old-fashioned kind, yet it is the fearless testimony of a man who had utmost confidence in a verbally inspired and all-sufficient Bible. In one of his writings he mentions the youngest of his nine children, a little lad of four years, who could face with utmost calmness the fiercest tempest because his father was at his side. The elder Guthrie's confidence in the Bible was equally sure.

It is quite true that Dr. Guthrie's system of theology was not what we might consider complete, yet his critics are singularly blind to the fact that his dozen or more books contain sermons that he preached to the farm laborers and handloom weavers of Arbirlot and to the unlettered people of Edinburgh's slums. He tells us more than once in his autobiography that it was his lifelong ambition to express the doctrines of Redemption in the simplest possible language so that the ragged people from the Old Town tenements might understand. If he did not make use of such terms as *sanctification*, *reprobation*, and *concreated righteousness*, it is not necessarily an indication of theological superficiality. Like Fundamentalists in general, from Charles Simeon, Thomas Boston, Thomas Chalmers, C. H. Spurgeon, and C. P. McIlvaine down to the time of Gresham Machen, W. J. Bryan, and Campbell Morgan, he was never able to grasp such truths as our doctrine of the means of grace, nor the doctrine of election as it was so admirably set forth by Dr. F. Pieper and by Dr. A. Hoenecke. Guthrie was a reformed theologian, and, as Carlyle said of Knox, "we are to take him for that; not require him to be other," much as we regret that his theological system was incomplete.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Guthrie, *The Way to Life* (London, 1862), pp. 86—101.

Guthrie's sermons are hardly models of homiletical style. His main divisions, clearly marked and always announced, are in the form of simple statements. Unfortunately these do not always grow out of the text. He has a sermon on the text: "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world."<sup>10</sup> From this text he derives three main divisions, namely: I. Consider the fall of Demas; II. Consider the cause of his fall; III. Learn the lessons this case teaches. Clearly his third main division cannot be considered a part of his text, although it might serve admirably as a conclusion or a practical application. In other cases we find Guthrie announcing a text, expounding it correctly, and then, without warning, going off on a tangent and introducing something foreign to the text. Generally it is a very important truth, but its relation to the text is difficult to see.

Guthrie has been called the greatest master of the pictorial style of preaching—perhaps the greatest of modern times. In his Sunday afternoon Bible hours in the village of Arbirlot he discovered that picturesque illustrations could reach the dull minds of the plowboys and the dairy maids. When he became the apostle to the Cowgate slums, he employed the same method. Today one would think nothing of it, but in 1837 such preaching was a novelty, particularly in Scotland, where pulpit propriety had been carried to extremes. Guthrie's illustrations are frankly sentimental, for he found that they reached the hearts of people of limited education: a shipwreck on a rocky Scottish coast; a ragged boy gazing at a window filled with Christmas gifts; a woman pawning her wedding ring in order to buy bread for her starving bairns; a beautiful child lying dead on a bed of filthy rags while her parents lounged about, too drunken to realize what had happened. Guthrie made use of such garish illustrations as these, and he used them freely. The people of the tenements filled his church and even sat on the very pulpit steps. Men of his time often describe Guthrie making his way with difficulty from the sacristy to the pulpit because of the mass of humanity that packed his church every Sunday.

Not all who came to hear him were slum dwellers. Hugh Miller, the distinguished editor of the *Witness*, was one of

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Guthrie, *Speaking to the Heart* (Edinburgh, 1862), pp. 201—216.

Guthrie's most faithful office-bearers, and he never missed a service. With his great plaid travel rug draped about his shoulder and his huge shock of red hair, he was a familiar figure at Free St. John's. Dr. James Y. Simpson and Dr. John S. Blackie were other faithful members. Lord Cockburn and Lord Jeffrey were usually present, although Jeffrey never became a communicant member. Thackeray and Gladstone attended Free St. John's whenever in Edinburgh, and even Wilberforce was often present. During the summer months many distinguished visitors from England and America came to hear Guthrie.

For thirty-four years the tall, broad-shouldered figure of Guthrie, followed by his favorite black collie, was a daily sight in the crazy, steep streets of the Old Town. He climbed the stairs of the reeking tenements, visiting the sick and dying, seeking to bring them to a realization of their sin and their need of salvation. Even an impaired heart condition did not stop him. He retained his proverbial cheerfulness to the end. At the age of 70, completely worn out by forty-three years of laborious effort, he lay dying. One of his sons tried to lift his head from the pillow. "Heave awa, lad!" he cried cheerfully, "I'm na dead yet!" Then, more solemnly, he said, "Just sing me a bairn's hymn." His family sang one of his favorite hymns, and then Guthrie said, "Pray that I may have a speedy entrance into Heaven, where we shall no longer have to proclaim Christ—but where we shall enjoy Him forever."<sup>11</sup>

Guthrie had a voice of great range and power, and his early training in public speaking had taught him to use it with the skill of an actor. He had a gift of persuasiveness that few could resist, and during his campaign for his Ragged Schools he not only succeeded in establishing his own school, but he formed an organization and encouraged the establishment of such schools in other parts of the city. His book *The City: its Sins and Sorrows* and his three printed pleas for Ragged Schools are ample proofs of his persuasive eloquence. Pedantic people said of his preaching, just as they said of the earlier sermons of Dr. John Brown of Broughton Place Kirk, that it was "for the maist part tinsel-wark"; yet it was a simple, pictorial style that attracted the un-

<sup>11</sup> *Autobiography and Memoir*, Vol. 2, pp. 486—490.

churched multitudes and delighted the poorer classes of people. Throughout his life he held to the one great central truth of salvation through Jesus Christ alone—that and his unflinching testimony to a verbally inspired Bible. Friends warned him that people would soon tire of the single theme of sin and grace, but Dr. Guthrie is one of the few men whose popularity did not wane in the least during his forty-three years in office. Certainly he never degraded his pulpit with Christless sermons. The writer of these lines has heard four of Edinburgh's eminent preachers—some of them several times. As a rule their sermons were Christless. Of Redemptive Christianity there was hardly a hint. One could but think of Thomas Guthrie and his ringing, flamboyant eloquence, his copious sentimentality, and his coruscant word pictures. He never would have indulged in the pseudo-psychiatry of today with its nonsensical sermons on "The Forceful Dynamics of Life" and "Man's Power to Conquer Life's Unconquerables."<sup>12</sup> With all his shortcomings, Guthrie always gave the Cross a central place in his sermons. He built two churches and filled them to capacity, and he had an important part in the establishment of a church in the Plaisance. Five other congregations owe their origin indirectly to him. Had he preached sermons of the modern "personality problem" type, his church might have been as empty as some of Edinburgh's churches are today.

If Guthrie's work was not permanent, he is not to blame. His large church stands to this day at the head of the Lawnmarket, at the foot of Castle Hill, but it is now a mere chapel of Tolbooth Church hard by. As long as Guthrie lived, his church was not only the home of a great congregation, but many people of all walks of life were brought to repentance and faith through his ministry. If his large congregation is but a shadow today, the blame may be laid squarely at the door of liberalists who think that Christ-centered preaching is old-fashioned. They cannot seem to realize that lost sinners cannot be reclaimed by sermons on "Adjusting Yourself to

<sup>12</sup> A certain man preached recently on the text "Why art thou cast down, O my soul?" His theme was "Life's Gloomy Moods." His divisions were: I. We cannot cure them by running away from them; II. We cannot get rid of them by going on a vacation; III. We cannot avoid them by blaming them on the weather; IV. We must admit they exist and face them unafraid. This is typical of the nonsense of the popular "Personality Problems" school of preaching of today.

**Life's Realities."** Thomas Guthrie, with his imperfect system of theology, accomplished much. He did this because he held firmly to the facts of sinful man's hopeless condition and the power of the Lord Jesus to confer life and salvation upon the believer and because he had implicit confidence in the Bible. Of the Bible he said:

"Wondrous Book! It levels all, and yet leaves variety of ranks; it humbles the lofty and exalts the lowliest; it condemns the best and yet saves the worst; it engages the study of angels and is not above the understanding of a little child; it shows us man raised to the position of a son of God, and the Son of God stooping to the condition of a man. It heals by wounding and kills to make alive. It is an armory of heavenly weapons, a laboratory of infallible medicines, a mine of exhaustless wealth. Teaching kings how to reign and subjects how to obey, masters how to rule and domestics how to serve, pastors how to preach and people how to hear, teachers how to instruct and pupils how to learn, husbands how to love their wives and wives how to obey their husbands, it contains rules for men in all possible conditions of life. It is a Guide-Book for every road; a chart for every sea; a medicine for every malady; a balm for every wound; and a comfort for every grief. Divinely adapted to our circumstances, whatever these may be, we can say of this Book as David said of the giant's sword, 'Give me that, there is none like it.' Rob us of the Bible and the sky has lost its sun; and in other, even in the best of other books, we have naught left but the glimmer of twinkling stars. Now, my text crowns all these eulogies; like the keystone of the arch that binds all the parts of the span together, it gives the rest their power and value; for what were all the promises and prospects of this sacred volume unless we knew that they could not fail, and were assured by Him who is the Truth, as well as the Way and the Life, that it were 'easier for Heaven and earth to pass, than one tittle of the law to fail?'. . .

"It has often been reviled; but it has never been refuted. Its foundations have been examined by the most searching eyes. In Hume, and Gibbon, and Voltaire, and La Place, to pass such coarse and vulgar assailants as Tom Paine and Carlisle with their few living followers, the Bible has had to sustain the assaults of the greatest talent, the sharpest wit and



the acutest intellects. To make it appear a cunningly-devised fable, philosophers have sought arguments amid the mysteries of science, and travellers amid the hoar remains of antiquity; for that purpose geologists have ransacked the bowels of the earth and astronomers the stars of heaven; and yet, after sustaining the most cunningly-devised and ably-executed assaults of eighteen hundred years, there it stands; and shall stand, defiant of time, of men, of devils — a glorious illustration of the words of its Founder, 'On this rock have I built my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it!'

"Since those eighteen hundred years began to run, what revolutions time has wrought! what changes he has seen! The oldest monarchies have been overthrown; the dawn of truth has chased away the darkness of a long night; the maxims of statesmen and the theories of science have shifted like the wind; success has crowned the boldest innovator on all old established systems. Jove is gone, but not Jehovah, the Hebrews' God. On Grecian headlands and Roman hills the temples of Jupiter stand in mouldering ruin; but temples sacred to Jesus are rising on every shore. Since John wrote in his cell at Patmos and Paul preached in his own hired house at Rome, the world has been turned upside down; all old things have passed away; all things on earth have changed but one. Rivalling in fixedness, and more than rivalling in brightness, the stars that saw our world born and shall see it die, that rejoiced in its birth and shall be mourners at its burial, the Word of our God stands forever. Time, that weakens all things else, has but strengthened the impregnable position of the believer's faith, and hope, and confidence. And as, year by year, the tree adds another ring to its circumference, every age has added the testimony of its events to this great truth, 'The grass withereth, and the flower fadeth, but the Word of the Lord shall endure forever.'" <sup>13</sup>

Dr. Guthrie is attractive to us today not only because he was one of the most brilliant pulpit orators of the nineteenth century and because of his intense interest in evangelizing the unchurched people of his city; but he is of especial interest to us because of his firm conviction that a church without a parish school is a church without future. In this matter he has been misunderstood. At one period of his life he

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Guthrie, *The Way to Life* (Edinburgh, 1862), pp. 103—107.

was an eloquent champion of the National School movement. This does not indicate any loss of interest in the parochial school. He found that the parish schools of the Church of Scotland and those of the Free Church were unable to reach all the children. Even with these excellent schools, by this time almost 2,000 in number, many children were still growing up without an education. It was then that he took to the platform and urged the organization of State-controlled schools, for he saw that the task was too great for the two larger Presbyterian groups and the two or three minor Presbyterian bodies.

Thomas Guthrie's three pleas for Ragged Schools, issued at first in the form of three pamphlets, were eventually included as a supplementary section of *The City: its Sins and Sorrows*. They are masterpieces of persuasive propaganda; and for those who would maintain a parochial school, especially in the poorer sections of a city, his words will prove of interest today. While they are rhetorical and while he makes free use of pathos, yet his vivid pictures of children growing up like young pagans have a strong appeal even today. He heard of Sheriff Watson of Aberdeen and his original Ragged School. He heard of John Pounds of Portsmouth, a Christian cobbler, who opened a school for poor children in 1819. His shop was but seven feet wide by eighteen deep, yet John Pounds filled every square foot of it with children. Guthrie was greatly moved. "I confess that I felt humbled," he said. "I felt ashamed of myself. I well remember saying to my companion in the enthusiasm of the moment, and in my calmer and cooler hours I have seen no reason for unsaying it, 'That man is an honour to humanity. He deserves the tallest monument ever raised on British shores.'<sup>14</sup> Today a fine bronze statue of John Pounds, surrounded by several ragged children, may be seen in Portsmouth, and his little wooden shop was long one of the show places of the city. At least four accounts of his life have been written.<sup>15</sup>

The story of the cobbler led Guthrie to visit the Edin-

<sup>14</sup> *Autobiography*, Vol. 2, pp. 112—113.

<sup>15</sup> Anon., *A Memoir of the Late Mr. John Pounds* (Portsmouth, 1839); *Lives of Distinguished Shoemakers* (Portland, Me., 1849); Wm. Anderson, *Kings of Society* (London, 1873); R. E. Jayne, *The Story of John Pounds* (London, 1925).

burgh police stations with one of his elders. He found scores of homeless children sleeping on the bare stone floors. The governor of Edinburgh Prison told him that 740 children had been imprisoned within three years for minor offenses: this in a city whose population at that time was but 150,000. Guthrie found that most of the homeless children of Edinburgh came from the homes of worthless, drunken parents, who thrust their children out on the street to shift for themselves. A smaller number were orphans. Edinburgh had, at that time, seven large hostels for children, yet many remained homeless. Guthrie opened his parish school in the church basement, and within a very few months he had 265 pupils enrolled. He provided the children with meals and warm clothing, and his school cost him \$10,000 a year at the outset. Not only did he appeal to the well-to-do people who filled the church galleries, but he organized a city-wide group and fired them with zeal for the Ragged School movement. He went before Parliament and urged his cause. He delivered lectures throughout Scotland and England, and lived to see Ragged Schools in scores of large cities, and even ten such schools where the children were quartered in unused ships tied up at the docks in various seaports.

It was not long until trouble arose. A cry was raised that compulsory religious training is an infringement upon the rights of free citizens. Guthrie insisted that religion must be taught in his parish school, and he fought the case to a finish and won. He attended a great mass meeting, called by a group who termed themselves the Protestant Liberals. Guthrie walked to the platform and declared that not one of his school children, now numbering 300, had come from a Christian home. Their parents, in every case, were virtual pagans. He was not trying to teach the Bible and the Westminster Catechism to Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Methodists, and Baptists, but to children whose background had been paganism. This declaration convinced the majority of his opponents.

Guthrie lived long enough to see many of his street Arabs become useful citizens. Between the years 1847 and 1851 the number of children in Edinburgh Prison was reduced from 315 to 56, and the warden of the prison declared that Guthrie's Ragged Schools had been "the principal instruments in effect-

ing so desirable a change." Some years later, at a commencement at Edinburgh University, Dr. Guthrie could not restrain his tears when he saw one of his former waifs, now a handsome young man, receive his Master's degree. Taking sixty names at random, he found that fifty-six of his parochial school graduates had become useful citizens, and some held positions of responsibility and trust.

The object of the Ragged School, as Dr. Guthrie expressed it in the constitution and by-laws of his School Association, reads:

"It is the object of this Association to reclaim the neglected or profligate children of Edinburgh, by affording them the benefits of a good, common, and Christian education, and by training them to habits of regular industry, so as to enable them to earn an honest livelihood, and fit them for the duties of life. The general plan upon which the schools shall be conducted shall be as follows, viz:

"To give the children an allowance of food for their daily support.

"To instruct them in reading, writing and arithmetic.

"To train them in habits of industry, by instructing and employing them daily in such sorts of work as are suited to their years.

"To teach them the truths of the Gospel, making the Holy Scriptures the groundwork of instruction."<sup>16</sup>

In our own day, when congregations often enter a new community and begin by building a social hall before they build a church or school and plead that the high cost of building has compelled them to do this, one cannot escape the thought that there is much to be learned from such men as Thomas Guthrie. He realized the value of the Christian day school. When he found that the people who lived near by were too poor or too worthless to support such a school, he organized his well-to-do minority into a School Association and expanded this by drawing in other people from throughout the city. When he found that the children who lived near by were hungry and poorly clad, he provided them with meals and warm clothing, free of cost, and by his appeals, both printed and by word of mouth, he raised \$15,000 a year to support his enterprise — a large sum in those days.

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<sup>16</sup> *Autobiography*, Vol. 2, p. 120.

Have we, today, a right to abandon a run-down section of the city and move our churches to "fields of greater opportunity" in the residential suburbs? Have we a right to invest our money in social halls and parish houses and devote our evenings to entertainments of one kind or another, while the children of the tenements grow up without religious training of any kind? The money that will build a parish house will build a school. The hours devoted to social activities in the parish hall might be devoted to the training of a band of devoted people, pledged to give one evening each week to the task of calling upon the unchurched multitudes of the community. Guthrie did just this. Not only did he gain the children, but eventually he gained many of their parents; and the influence of Free St. John's Church, at the junction of Castle Hill, Lawnmarket and West Bow, transformed scores of good-for-nothing, drunken parents into devout Christians and faithful church workers. There were old people in prominent New York churches not so many years ago — lifelong church members, who had begun life in the Cowgate slums, and had been lifted from a state worse than paganism by Dr. Guthrie, his church and his school. Chalmers, Tasker, MacColl, Ross, Macleod, and others had the same experience and employed the same methods in the poorer tenement sections of Edinburgh and Glasgow. If the Presbyterians can do it, so can we.

It is well that we send food, clothing, Bibles, and Catechisms to the hungry and ragged children of Central Europe. Their sad stories move us; but after all, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Cardiff, Durham, Dublin, and scores of other cities have always had their swarms of hungry and ragged children. The man answers poorly who tells us that other denominations have a duty toward those people as well as we. He forgets that those very denominations, lacking the solid doctrinal foundation that is ours by an unmerited gift of grace, have gone down under the withering blight of Higher Criticism and Modernism. Who ever heard of a Higher Critic devoting his time to the evangelization of the poor or a Modernist engaged in organizing Christian day schools? Such men seek fashionable, wealthy congregations, and they ridicule the parochial school. When Higher Criticism and Modernism take possession of a religious denomination, missionary zeal languishes,

schools (if any) are closed, and their empty buildings are turned into social halls; and in such surroundings one never hears of worthless families transformed into devout Christians. Under the malevolent influence of liberal theology there is no zeal for such work as that of Thomas Guthrie; and the Christless sermons of the Modernist will repel rather than attract the very people who need religion. A grave responsibility rests upon those of us who still, by the Lord's mercy, possess the saving truth.

#### THOMAS GUTHRIE'S MORE IMPORTANT WORKS

- The Gospel in Ezekiel* (Edinburgh, 1856). Unsatisfactory.
- The City: its Sins and Sorrows* (Edinburgh, 1857). Brilliant word pictures of the needs of the unchurched and the poor.
- Christ and the Inheritance of the Saints* (Edinburgh, 1858). A series of sermons on Colossians.
- The Street Preacher* (Edinburgh, 1858). An account of Robert Flockhart.
- Seed Time and Harvest of Ragged Schools* (Edinburgh, 1860).
- The Way to Life* (Edinburgh, 1862). A series of sermons.
- Speaking to the Heart* (Edinburgh and London, 1862).
- Man and the Gospel* (London, 1865). Sermons.
- The Angels' Song* (Edinburgh, 1865). Twelve studies in the Redemption, in the form of short devotions.
- The Parables* (London, 1866). Twelve sermons.
- Early Piety* (London, 1867).
- Our Father's Business* (London, 1867). Eleven religious essays.
- Studies in Character* (London, 1867). Old Testament worthies. Sixteen essays.
- Out of Harness* (London, 1867). Articles appearing originally in the magazine edited by Guthrie.
- Pleas for Ragged Schools*. Originally three pamphlets, published in 1847, 1849, 1850, and later in book form.
- Autobiography of the Rev. Thomas Guthrie, and Memoir by His Sons*, 2 vols. (London, 1874).
- Platform Sayings, Anecdotes and Stories of Thomas Guthrie* (Edinburgh and London, 1863). Compiled from his writings.  
New York, N. Y.

#### Contributors to This Issue

Dr. L. B. Buchheimer, for many years pastor of the Church of Our Redeemer in St. Louis, Mo., has retired from the active ministry; he lives in St. Louis.

The Rev. F. R. Webber is in charge of the Lutheran Parish Center, N. Y., editor of the *Church Builder*, and secretary of the Committee on Church Architecture of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.