

Edward Irving (1792-1834)

by Keith Malcomson

The sermon explores the life, ministry, and enduring impact of Edward Irving, a pivotal figure in 19th-century Christianity known for his teachings on the Holy Spirit and prophetic ministry.

Scripture: Acts 20:24, 1 Corinthians 2:4, 1 Corinthians 14:1, 1 Timothy 4:12, 1 Peter 4:10

Topics: "Church History", "Holy Spirit"

Description

Keith Malcomson delivers a sermon on the life of Edward Irving, a Scottish preacher who faced challenges and controversies in his ministry. Irving's journey from a small town in Scotland to becoming a renowned preacher in London, his passion for missions, and his teachings on the Holy Ghost and Christ's nature are highlighted. Despite facing opposition and accusations of heresy, Irving remained steadfast in his beliefs, leading to the formation of the Catholic Apostolic Church, known as the 'Irvingites,' with its unique structure and beliefs.

Transcript

Edward Irving was born on 4th August 1792 in a small town in Scotland called Annan, where a statue of him can still be seen today. The blood of Lutherans & Huguenot's ran in his family line and his father was a faithful consistent Presbyterian. In the area of his upbringing the strong traditions of Covenanter tales were everywhere, no doubt he would have heard the stories of these preacher-prophets who were persecuted and martyred for the faith. At the age of eleven he left the church of his family to join the Seceders, who were a break off from the Presbyterian Church. This split came a 100 years before out of a desire for a purer belief and practice of the scriptures in producing a purer church. By the time he was twelve he had set his heart on becoming a minister. At thirteen he left home for Edinburgh to attend University in preparation for his life ahead.

Throughout life his well built stature, well over six feet tall, would always set him apart as well as a squint in his eye and his dark elegant looks. Having finished University and now 18 years old he took on to teach at a school in Haddington where he stayed for just two years. He was then asked to become the Master of a new school at Kirkcaldy where he stayed for the next six years and where he met his future wife Isabella. He had received a licence to preach but needed a call from a Church to be ordained, which he would have to patiently wait for. During this time he would preach when invited by a Church but this did not satisfy his heart. He found the preaching of the day dull and dead. He resigned this school and once more moved to Edinburgh. During this time he strongly thought about becoming a missionary, this was only adverted

when he found out that Dr. Thomas Chalmers from Glasgow, the most renowned preacher in Scotland at that time, was looking for an assistant, and Irving was asked to preach before him in Edinburgh. A week past and he heard nothing. Out of discouragement he took a boat to Ireland after which he received a note from Chalmers asking him to come to Glasgow for an interview. Immediately he made his way to Glasgow.

At the age of twenty seven he now commenced his work as assistant to one of the greatest Scotsman of his day. Chalmers had made Glasgow a small welfare state, all schools were in his power and he stood forth as a national figure. These two men were worlds apart in character, style and vision. But during this time Irving threw himself into helping the poor. He had a great warmth and friendship towards all. These two men never quite merged in the work and within two years Irving was thinking of missionary work again. At this very time he received two letters; one was a call to a large congregation in Jamaica, the other to a prestigious church in New York. But then a decisive letter came from the Caledonian Church in London, which was no more than a Church for an orphanage in a very poor area. The congregation had dwindled to 50 people and this was now a desperate call from them, a last attempt to revive the work. He quickly responded with great enthusiasm. It was in July 1822 that he preached his first message to this small gathering.

Almost immediately his fame spread and crowds started to gather in to hear this Scots preacher. Daily he gave himself to study and prayer as well as making himself available to the aid of all. Like an Old Testament Prophet he zealously denounced sin in high places. Within months the Honourable George Canning, who later became Prime Minister, came to hear him. Of that first message he said when addressing Parliament and speaking of Irving that it was the most eloquent he ever heard. After this he regularly attended this Church and often urged his associates to join him in listening to "the greatest orator of our times." Often three times the capacity of the 500 seater building would come to hear him. After two years he laid the foundation for a new building that would hold a congregation of at least 1,800 people. This became known as the National Scotch Church. It was during these years that he started to write books on missions, end days and the person of Christ. Some of these were great successes others were received and mocked as sad failures. In 1823 he married Isabella Martin at her home in Kirkaldy, this was a happy time in his life. Their lifestyle was very simple and their door always open.

In 1824 he was asked to speak for the London Missionary Society at their annual rally to which the Directors would invite the finest speaker available with the motive that he would stir hearts to support them financially. Irving took as his title, "For Missionaries after the Apostolic School." He pictured the early centuries of the church and the example of the Apostles who went forth free from all organization and dictates of men, their Gospel mightily confirmed by supernatural signs and miracles. He hit out at dependence on money instead of trust in God alone, he pronounced that Apostolic power had now been replaced by man-made machinery. He went on to put this message in print. As a result he was assailed on every side as a visionary. For the next four years the focus of his ministry was the last days. The soon coming of the Lord burned in his heart and message. He believed the stage was set, much was fulfilled, Jesus was coming and judgement upon the nations was ripe. He preached that after this judgement Christ would set up His millennial reign of peace on the earth for 1000 years. From 1826 an annual prophetic conference was held in Albury London for five years, it was a gathering of about twenty men like Irving who would discuss prophetic scripture. He became immovably convinced that Christ's coming would be preceded by a Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Ghost, the latter rain of Joel.

It was in the midst of this time in 1825 that his first and youngest child took seriously ill. At the same time his wife gave birth to a baby girl. After weeks of careful watching in prayer and intercession over his son

he sadly died. Irving rose by faith in Gods Word yet this left him a broken melted man at the feet of Jesus. In 1827 at an ordination service of another young Scott's man he preached what came to be famed as his "Ordination Charge." It is filled with his powerfully and high views of ministry, the pastoral office and leadership in the church. He was maturing as a man of God. This same year he opened the new 1,800 seater National Scotch Church. For the opening he invited Chalmers from Glasgow to come preach, it had been five years since he left him to come to London. The congregation gathered three hours before the meeting. Irving being used to long services, long preaching and long praying made this service the same, leaving a bad taste with a number, not least Chalmers who was merely fitted in near the end of the meeting.

Also in 1827 Irving started to teach on the sacrament of baptism. Within this series he began to proclaim his views on the baptism of the Holy Ghost as a separate experience from salvation. He later said that from that time he never moved in his belief that the nine gift of the Holy Ghost, the five ministry gifts of Ephesians 4 and the supernatural workings of the Spirit in the book of Acts were to be permanent and inseparable both from the person of the Holy Ghost and the Church. His last point of exhortation on this was to instruct his church to repent for themselves and their fathers for the unbelief that brought about the loss of all these things and to mourn for the spiritual state of the church. This subject would be on hold for the next three years as he began to teach on "Christs coming in our flesh, and in coming again in glory."

Accusations started to arise from those outside his church of heresy in his teaching. But before he responded to these accusations he went on a preaching tour of Scotland. This coincided with the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland meeting in Edinburgh where almost all the ministers of the Church in Scotland were in attendance. He announced 12 lectures on the subject of the Apocalypse (Revelation) beginning each morning at six. He started in the biggest churches in the city which were immediately overcrowded. Some of these meetings drew 10'000 people. His fame spread, though a few ministers it seems were greatly concerned about his new interpretation of end day scriptures, yet men like the Bonar brothers were impacted significantly. He then moved to Glasgow again drawing great crowds.

He then visited Row a town in Gare Loch in the west of Scotland. Under the ministry of McLeod Campbell a religious revival had come to the whole area as he preached the Gospel of the love of God in Christ. Many had been saved and stirred to spiritual matters. When Irving came preaching it just strengthened the whole work. These local ministers readily accepted his ministry. Irving asked one of them called A.J. Scott to come to London as his assistant, which he did for the next two years. This young man had very strong scriptural views on the restoration of the baptism and gifts of the Holy Ghost. Before leaving Scotland Irving was to preach at Kirkaldy but before he arrived the balcony collapsed and about 35 people were injured and killed. He was grieved to the heart.

When back in London accusations that he was preaching that Christ was a sinner were spreading and so he published his sermons in order to explain himself but this added fuel to the fire. In 1828 he made another visit to Scotland at the time of the Church of Scotland session in Edinburgh but this time the churches were shut to him, the Assembly rejected him and he only managed to get a smaller secluded chapel, but yet again he was amazed at how many ministers still came. Rumours ran around that he was preaching Catholic doctrine, others said that he was preaching a Muslim heaven. He moved on to preach in Glasgow with rejection but in other towns with great crowds. Then lastly Gare Loch again where he found a full reception and was received gladly amongst a prepared people.

When he returned to London he found opposition at a height. The press were now publishing letters against him, no doubt with a desire to sell papers. Ministers across England took up pen to contradict him. Throughout 1829 he tried to defend himself without success. He had delved into a subject on the incarnation, Christ's human nature and Divine nature that lay him open to great attack. He did not explain himself well and he no doubt made theological mistakes in such a deep subject. It would have been well for him to have stayed away from such depths, difficulties and disputes. Finally in 1830 the Presbytery of London called him to account on heresy. There were three ministers and three elders. He rejected their censure and carried on in ministry. His own church elders and deacons unanimously stood with him, they published a statement of their adherence to the fact that Jesus was "very God and very man, yet one Christ", as well as rejecting all the supposed teachings of heresy that Irving was accused of preaching.

In that year a gracious move of the Spirit came to Gare Loch, the sick were healed, believers began to be baptised in the Holy Ghost, they spoke in tongues, prophesied and interpreted [See West Scotland 1830 Coming Soon]. The theologian Thomas Erskine came to inspect this work, he left convinced this was a work of the true Spirit of God, that the tongues were supernatural and the gifts had not been removed from the Church. He later wrote extensive scriptural works on the gifts of the Holy Ghost. Irving's three good friends Campbell, Maclean and Scott were also attacked. Maclean stood charged of believing that God loved all and died for all. Such teachings were unacceptable to Scots Presbyterians. Thomas Boston had to fight this same battle 100 years before. In May 1831 the General Assembly sat to decide actions against these men and their preaching of the love of God and of the provision of Christ different from the statutes of the Church of Scotland.

Beginning on the 30th April about 1000 believers gathered each morning from 6.30 to 7.30 in London to pray to God for the gathering of this Assembly. The Assembly found all three guilty and so removed them from ministry. They also made a threat against Irving that if he ever returned to Scotland to preach he would stand before a church court to be held accountable for his writings and teachings.

The prayer meetings continued after the close of the Assembly but now with a prayer for an outpouring of the Holy Ghost and the restoration of the gifts as well as the five ministries of Ephesians chapter 4. In these prayer meetings one after another began to be filled with the Spirit and speak in tongues. Irving taught that "tongues" were the 'standing sign' of the Baptism of the Holy Ghost. By September quite a number had been filled. Six especially stood out as prophets and prophetesses. This eventually spilled over into the Sunday morning meetings which alarmed the Trustees of the church greatly. They brought a charge against their minister and in April 1832 the London Presbytry called him to account again. Just before the trial two of his so-called prophets turned back from all these things believing it to be a delusion. One of them though believing it to be a delusion, later wrote of Irving as being a man of God who showed great charity to all men and who had a sincere love of the truth as did all those who were speaking in tongues and prophesying.

The court lasted three days. Irving's defense was always clear. He constantly pleaded a trial by the written Word of God. His accusers made it a trial by Presbyterian standards and laws. The sum total of accusations against him was that he encouraged members, non-members and women of the church to interrupt and disrupt the services. One of the elders testified at this court that none of the doctrines taught in the church were objected to by any of the congregation and that great order and respect always accompanied the operation of the gifts. On the third day a petition was handed in by elders, deacons, members and seat holders who spoke for 95 percent of the congregation who rejected the actions of the trustees in bringing Irving to trial. They noted that the only confusion and disruption came in the early

stages from visitors and not those operating gifts. These had now operated for many months in real order. This evidence was not received by the court. They found him guilty as well as deceived and deluded. The very next morning as he went to prayer he found his own church locked to him and to his people. In light of this 800 of the congregation followed him out into a new work. Most of these had come to Christ under his own ministry. Only a handful were left to carry on services in the Scots church.

Lastly he was called before the church that had first ordained him at Annan in Scotland. The accusation was heresy concerning his views on Christ's nature. After a period of several hours and just before the final condemnation a local minister broke forth in a prophesy of rebuke to the board. Immediately Irving arose and left in a state of grand triumph. The next day he preached in a field to 1,700 people. Over the following days he preached along the Dumfriesshire coast in the open air to vast crowds and then returned to London. Again some good friends turned away from him and these teachings and practices which he held most dear. One of these was David Brown who was his assistant from 1830-32; later he became co-author of the famous Jamieson, Fausset and Brown Commentary.

The church met in a rented room and he continued to preach but under the new authority of the prophets. From amongst these prophets the first apostle was called forth, a Mister Cardale. They then found a new building in Newman Street and turned it into a church building. In his latter days Irving to a great degree let himself be ruled by apostles, prophets and the operation of prophesy. These new leaders never esteemed him with the honor that was due him. He now regularly preached in open places in the city where crowds gathered to hear him.

Over into 1834 his health began to break and fade fast. His preaching no longer had the fire of earlier years. He made a journey to Edinburgh to help establish a new work their. He was not long back in London when again he was of on his last trip heading for Glasgow. He spent many weeks traveling through England and Wales being welcomed everywhere. Finally when he reached Liverpool his health was in a bad state so he called for his beloved Isabella to join him. They then both traveled to Glasgow by boat. After preaching two Sundays and founding a new church he retreated to his death bed. In this state he was visited by Campbell and other friends. Some of his last words were the 23rd Psalm spoken in Hebrew. This war-torn warrior now entered his eternal rest. After his death the work from Newman Street grew up into the Catholic Apostolic Church, nicknamed "Irvingites" with its 12 appointed apostles. They drew on believers from different church denominations, the Baptists, congregational, Anglican and others, thus was born the "Seven Churches of London." It spread out into Britain, Europe and America.

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