

Brethren Historical Review 6: 112-14

Donald Ross: A Soteriological Retrospective

James Harvey

December, 2009, <http://impact59.wordpress.com>

70 pp. Free download

An Arminian version of free-will and conditional election are so entrenched among many Open Brethren today that Calvinistic alternatives to these doctrines are perceived not merely as false, but as a threat to the gospel itself. How ironic then that the preeminent pioneer evangelist of the 'Revival' Brethren should turn out to be a Calvinist! Such is the case argued by James Harvey in his paper 'Donald Ross: A Soteriological Retrospective'.

Harvey, from Omaha, Nebraska, who describes himself as having 'a multi-generational Brethren background' and as 'a technologist for a multinational financial services company', begins his essay by describing Ross as 'the key founding figure among Revival Brethren and is their preeminent evangelist even to this day[!]'(p.4). He identifies 'Revival' Brethren as 'those Open Brethren with historical ties more directly to Scotland and the 1859 Revival than to the older English centre in Bristol—including nearly all Open Brethren in Scotland, Northern Ireland and North America' (p.4 n.1). After a summary of Ross's life and significance to 'Revival' Brethren, Harvey makes a case for the relevance of the central question of the essay: was Donald Ross a Calvinist? Since the issues explore the theological foundations of the gospel and the proclamation of that gospel in evangelism, and since evangelism continues to be central to 'Revival' Brethren, then this question merits serious attention. Indeed Harvey hopes that the revelation of Ross's Calvinism will cause Open Brethren to rethink their own anti-Calvinistic position.

Harvey proceeds by gathering four main lines of evidence to demonstrate Ross's Calvinistic soteriology. First, the fact that Ross was reared in a conservative Presbyterian home ensured his knowledge of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, and while he departed from some elements of his Calvinistic heritage (e.g. baptism and eschatology), he never abandoned its soteriology. Second, Ross

was influenced by several Calvinistic evangelists whom he admired and there is no evidence that he differed with their soteriology. Third, although Ross was charged with being Morisonian, he emphatically denied it and took the opportunity of the accusation to affirm his basic Calvinistic soteriology. Fourth, Harvey explores Ross's own words to demonstrate beyond any doubt that he was a Calvinist—even though, in typical Brethren fashion, he did not accept the label for himself. In an effort to demonstrate that Ross was not the only teacher among the Brethren who held these views, Harvey brings the essay to a close by briefly highlighting the Calvinistic soteriology of Darby, Kelly, and Mackintosh. Although, of course, these were not 'Revival' Brethren, they were still read widely by Open Brethren and thus their inclusion in a paper on Ross is still appropriate.

James Harvey is to be commended for his study of Donald Ross. While Ross has not been ignored, his impact on the Brethren in Scotland and North America through evangelism, planting assemblies, and launching several important magazines, certainly warrants more analysis. Furthermore, it is fascinating to explore the theology that motivated and animated his indefatigable evangelism—especially in the light of wide-scale departure from that theology among his ecclesiastical descendants.

While a compelling case is made for Ross's Calvinism, Harvey's categories become somewhat cumbersome when, for example, he classifies William Kelly as a 'moderate Calvinist' who represents a 'modified Calvinism model'—the latter category ostensibly explains why Kelly refused to identify himself as a Calvinist! Furthermore, despite the title, Harvey does not deal with soteriology in broad terms but limits his focus to the so-called five points of Calvinism. Thus he does not examine Ross's understanding of the nature of the gospel, sanctification and assurance. Brethren evangelists, including those who had been members of Ross's Northern Evangelistic Society, were frequently assailed by critics for their preaching of 'instant salvation' and 'propositional assurance' that ran contrary to standard Calvinistic teaching. Moreover Harvey may overestimate

Ross's loyalty to the Shorter Catechism. In a piece on salvation in the *Northern Evangelistic Intelligencer* (June 1872) Ross dubs such human products 'muddy streams' that are 'nauseous' in comparison to the fountain of the word of God. Indeed to Ross, searching the Reformed catechisms and confessions for instruction on the means of salvation is like looking for gold in 'a common sewer.'

Harvey's essay is attractively formatted and includes both a bibliography and an index. The piece is posted on his blog (itself dedicated to the 1859 revival), not published in a formal journal. Thus it would benefit from an editor's pen to reduce the sometimes bloated prose and help the piece move more swiftly to its most important section—Ross's own convictions on the question at hand. Finally, it should be noted that Harvey's polemics occasionally veer into condescension (e.g. 'Some of these self-proclaimed "Biblicists" find cover for their soteriological ineptness or ambivalence in such fine-sounding nonsensical claims and could thus be confused for people unable to think', p.53) which is more likely to alienate than persuade his intended audience. However, if present Brethren were more familiar with the theology of their forebears, there might be more light and less heat in current debates.

Mark Stevenson