

Oswald Chambers : An Evangelical Mystic.

Some time ago a Christian Renewal reader phoned me and asked whether I would be willing to write a review on Oswald Chambers' book of daily readings, *My Utmost for His Highest*. He was enthusiastic about this devotional. However, some in his church disagreed with its teaching and its dated style of writing. Who was Oswald Chambers? Why do so many, young and old alike, still read his devotional today? For example, the gentleman who called me is elderly, but a Chinese friend of ours in his late twenties also reads it. Why do ministers from various denominations and missionaries associated with different faith missions find their continual inspiration not only from *My Utmost for His Highest* but also from his other writings?

Oswald Chambers was born on July 24, 1874, in Aberdeen, the principal seaport of northeast Scotland where his father was a Baptist pastor. He was converted under the ministry of the famous preacher Charles H. Spurgeon and shortly afterwards was baptized. In his early days he seemed to be headed for the arts. He studied art at the Kensington Art School in London. He wrote, "My life work as I see it...is to strike for the redemption of the aesthetic kingdom music and art and poetry - or rather the proving of Christ's redemption of it." After a dramatic spiritual experience, he gave up his art. In later years, there seems to have been a revival of interest in art and literature. On his forty-third birthday he wrote that the beauty of form, of expression, of colour were delighting him marvelously. "The old delight is back in a glorious edition deluxe, as it were." He left home for Edinburgh, where he studied logic, psychology, and philosophy. His student days were marked by economic hardships as students in his day didn't receive any grants. When he was about twenty, he felt called to the ministry and was vividly aware of a voice saying to him, "I need you for My service, but I can do without you." He entered Dunoon College, a small independent training center, to prepare himself for the Baptist ministry. During this time he met with Reader Harris Q.C., founder of the League of Prayer, who especially emphasized the work of the Holy Spirit. Through this parachurch movement, Chambers found continual opportunity for pulpit ministry in various denominations. In 1906 he traveled to the U.S.A. where he had an effective six months evangelistic tour. The next stage was to Japan, where he visited mission stations. In 1910 he married Gertrude Hobbes, a former court stenographer, who wrote down all of her husband's teachings verbatim. In 1911 Chambers became principal of the Bible Training College at Clapham Common, London (1911-15), which was founded by the League of Prayer as a spiritual training centre.

Chambers was an outstanding scholar, teacher, and an avid reader. Although his books are essentially devotional, he was well-read in theology, psychology, philosophy, He was greatly concerned that so much modern thinking in his day was non-Christian. He believed that Christians should develop a Christian mind. Hence he advocated wide reading as a basis for wise thinking. His great love for books is demonstrated in a letter he wrote to his sister when he was in the USA visiting Holiness camp meetings and the like;

My box has at last arrived. My books! I cannot tell you what they are to me – silent, wealthy, loyal lovers. To look at them, to handle them and to reread them! I do

thank God for my books with every fiber of my being. Friends that are ever true and ever your own.

To understand the teachings of Chambers we must take a brief look at the authors and the movement, which greatly influenced his thinking. The most significant authors in his life were Johann Tauler (c.1300-1361), Peter Taylor Forsyth (1824-1921), and James Denney (1857-1917). Tauler was a German mystic and preacher with an immense concern for everyone's spiritual health. He taught a practical Christianity of high personal demands, which he deemed the norm for every Christian. But the Word of God was less important than inner experience and introspection. Tauler allegorized Scripture. For example, he said that in the heart of each Christian must be found a Jerusalem as well as a Bethany. And in his sermons on the ascension of our Lord he never preached about the actual ascension but focused on his favourite theme of freedom from selfness and creaturelessness and becoming one with God. P.T. Forsyth, a Scottish theologian, sought to relate the gospel to the modern mind without surrendering its unique claims. He accepted the findings of historical criticism of the Scriptures, but unlike liberal theology, he believed that criticism must be subjected to the scrutiny of the Gospel. Forsyth also pioneered in the area of spirituality. He had the novel idea that "holy souls" furnish the most potent argument for the Gospel, apart from the Gospel itself. He believed that in our modern times the emphasis should no longer be on salvation by grace or justification by faith, but on justification by holiness (. i.e. by the holy God) and for holiness (life in communion with God). Scottish theologian James Denney concentrated in his writings on the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement, which he considered the touch stone of Christian theology. He viewed Christ's death on the cross as a revelation not merely of the love God has for us but also of His righteousness.

The movement which impacted Chambers and which he influenced in turn is the "Keswick" movement, named after the annual summer holiness conference of evangelicals which originated in 1875 in England. The movement, which branched out to Canada and the USA, aims to promote "practical holiness." It does not promote a specific theology. It is seeing itself as a spiritual clinic where defeated and ineffective Christians can be restored to spiritual health. The emphasis is on the "victorious Christian life" or the "higher Christian life." To reach this higher level of Christian living a post conversion experience is needed in which one is yielded fully to God. Total consecration is taught, which is a Christian's response to God's call for complete abandonment to the rule of Christ, involving both a crisis and a process. Christian service is the result of a Spirit filled life. Sinless perfection is not taught. The Christian's tendency to sin is not extinguished but merely counteracted by victorious living in the Spirit. Its stress on "the surrendered life" was and still is a moving force behind the faith mission movement. Through his private study of the Scriptures, strongly influenced by Tauler, Forsyth, Denney, and the Keswick movement, Chambers began to emphasize the holiness ideal in *My Utmost for His Highest*, which was compiled by his wife after his death. It is called a spiritual classic and has been translated into at least twelve languages, including Chinese. Mrs. Chambers said in the foreword that the daily readings were selected from various sources, chiefly from the lectures given at the Bible Training College and from the talks given to troops in Egypt.

Should Reformed Christians rush to the bookstore and buy a copy of *My Utmost for His Highest*? Chambers' total devotion to the Lord is inspiring and humbling. All of us are called to follow Christ, the Son of God and the Son of Man, to the utmost. And we must confess that we all fall far short of the ideal the Gospel sets before us. At the end of each day we need to repent of our sins of commission and omission and seek forgiveness. Yet I don't believe that Chambers' devotion is for us. The Christian faith he taught is privatized and individualistic. The golden thread of the covenant woven in the Old and New Testament is missing. *My Utmost for His Highest* communicates a fairly radical version of the Keswick's movement's stress on self-denial. It lacks joy and some even term it "morbid." Its key phrases are "are you prepared to let God take you into union with Himself... are you prepared to abandon entirely and let go?" "yielding to Jesus will break every form of slavery in any human life," and "God makes us broken bread and poured-wine to please Himself." *My Utmost for His Highest* reflects Chambers' spiritual journey, his focus on introspection, his search for reaching holiness at all cost, and his own experience of what the mystics called "the dark night of the soul," a period of long agony which was lifted only after he presented himself without reserve to the Lord. Although he rarely referred to it directly and certainly didn't expect other Christians to imitate him, Chambers' own mystical experience of "a second blessing," based on his reading of Luke 11:13 "If ye then being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?" was a turning point in his life.

Chambers practiced what he preached. In the dark days of the Great War he offered himself for service. In 1915, he said goodbye to his friends: "I am going out to Egypt to help the men in the armed forces. I have a text: 'I am ready to be offered' (2 Timothy 4). I do not know what it means, but I am ready." In Egypt, he became the superintendent of the YMCA huts in Zeitoun and Ismailia, serving the British troops in that capacity in the desert camps. His ministry had a great spiritual impact. In his day, the YMCA still adhered to its founding basis, which was to "seek to unite those young men who, regarding Jesus Christ as their God and Saviour according to the holy scriptures, desire to be his disciples in their faith and in their life, and to associate their efforts for the extension of his kingdom among young men." His courageous, dynamic, and much appreciated ministry came to an abrupt end. He suddenly took ill, was rushed to the Gizeh Red Cross Hospital in Cairo where he had surgery for appendicitis. He died on November 15, 1917. On his grave in Old Cairo Cemetery is a simple grave stone with the words "A believer in Christ," and below this a Bible opened at Luke 11: 13, a text which had become very precious to him.

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