

Dugald Sinclair
Seven Decades of Unstinting Service

By Edwin Broadus

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In 1894 George Munro included a supplement to his *Christian Evangelist* with pictures of six “Pioneer Preachers” whom he described as “noble and consecrated spirits...through whose spiritual vision, faith, and toil, was laid in Ontario the foundations of a new Communion, wherein all Christians might Scripturally unite in Christ.” One of the six was Dugald Sinclair, who after his arrival in Canada made his home in Lobo Township, near London, Ontario.¹

The life and work of Sinclair is remarkable, not only because of his length of service as a preacher (sixty-nine years, from his baptism in 1801 until two weeks before his death in 1870), but also because of his openness to new truth (he began as a Presbyterian, served many years as a Baptist in both Scotland and Canada, and then, when he about eighty, united with the Disciples.

Sinclair was born May 25, 1777 in Argyllshire, Scotland, near the town of Bellanoch in the Scottish Highlands.² He was reared in the Presbyterian faith, but as a young man he came in contact with Baptists and was immersed in Glasgow by James Lister in March 1801. Lister was from Liverpool, but in November 1801 he planted an “English” Baptist church in Glasgow – one of the first of these Baptist churches to be organized in Scotland. Sinclair’s decision to accept believer’s baptism is early evidence of his openness to new truth.

Sinclair returned to Argyllshire in 1801, where that year Donald McVicar established an independent church in Bellanoch. McVicar had studied at Robert Haldane’s seminary when it was located at Glasgow from 1799 to 1802 under the direction of Greville Ewing. Neither Haldane nor Ewing had accepted immersion at that time, but by 1803 McVicar was baptized. He may have learned about adult immersion through Lister or even through Sinclair.

Meanwhile, in Edinburgh, a talented young man named Christopher Anderson was also immersed in March 1801. Anderson had wanted to be a missionary to India, but doctors advised against his going there, so he decided to evangelize in his home city. In 1806 he established an “English” Baptist church there, and served as its pastor for about forty-five years. He also yearned to take the gospel to the Highlands – a desire that eventually led him to Dugald Sinclair. The chain of events that brought the two men together is interesting. In 1803 Anderson immersed McVicar.³ Two years later Anderson visited another “English” Baptist minister, George Barclay, who had studied in the Haldane school when McVicar was there. Anderson and one of the deacons from Barclay’s church then went to Bellanoch, where they set in order the church that McVicar had earlier planted there and which had become Baptist. Sinclair lived nearby and likely worshiped there at times. Whether Anderson and Sinclair actually met at this time, we do

¹ Reuben Butchart, *The Disciples of Christ in Canada Since 1830*, 137. The other preachers were James Black, James Kilgour, Alexander Anderson, Edmund Sheppard, and Charles J. Lister.

² Much of the information in this article about the life of Dugald Sinclair is from Chapter 6, “Dugald Sinclair and James Black” of the author’s book, *How the Disciples Came Together in Early Ontario* (85-106), published in 2009 by the Gospel Herald Foundation, Beamsville, Ontario. The definitive study of Sinclair’s work in Scotland is that of Donald E. Meek, “Dugald Sinclair, The Life and Work of a Highland Itinerant Missionary,” *Scottish Studies*, 1991, 59-91. Meek and others have provided somewhat cursory surveys of Sinclair’s work in Canada. This paper is an attempt to provide, through examination of contemporary records, a more complete account of this part of his life, with special emphasis on his transition from Baptist to Disciple.

³ Geoffrey Hudson Ellis, *An Inquiry into the Growth of the Disciples of Christ in 19th Century Ontario*, MTS Thesis, Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, Wilfred Laurier University, 1993, 41.

not know, but it seems at least to have brought Sinclair to the attention of Anderson and Barclay, for the following year Barclay arranged for Sinclair to further prepare himself for preaching by enrolling in Horton Bible College (also called Bradford Academy) in Bradford, England.

Dugald Sinclair spent three years at Horton, and during that time he preached every Sunday in the vicinity of the school. While there he mastered New Testament Greek and was known for his ability in the language until the end of his life.⁴ While Sinclair was at Horton, Anderson and Barclay formed a society to promote missions in the Highlands. Alexander McLeod was chosen that year to be a missionary in Perthshire, and two years later, after he had completed his schooling, Sinclair was selected to be a missionary in Argyllshire and in the islands on the western side of Scotland.

From 1810 until 1815 Sinclair kept journals describing his work, and these were published by Anderson to promote the society's mission. In his entry for Saturday, June 9, 1810, Sinclair tells how he was set apart for the work of an itinerant missionary. Anderson, Barclay, and a third man officiated at the service. Sinclair writes, "The difficulties, the dangers, the arduousness, and the blessedness of the work before me, moved and overpowered my soul."

Sinclair proved to be both dedicated and sacrificial as a missionary. That first year he wrote to Anderson, "Ever since I have been out last my heart bleeds for the Highlands and Islands of Scotland." Anderson, in turn, told the famous mission advocate, Andrew Fuller, "Sinclair, trained at Bradford Academy, has been our best and busiest man. He has been labouring the darkest corners of Scotland...where the ignorance and desperation of the people is no less."

During his itinerant years, Sinclair endured countless hardships. Land travel was frequently over difficult terrain in all kinds of weather. Travel among the islands was often risky, sometimes because of raging seas and sometimes because of inadequate boats. There was opposition, not only from the established clergy but also at times from landowners who did not want their tenants distracted by his preaching. But Sinclair continued to preach wherever people would listen, in barns, or houses, or in the open air. Sometimes only a handful was present; on other occasions listeners numbered in the hundreds.

In 1814 Sinclair succeeded Donald McVicar as pastor of the Bellanoch church, and the following year he and his entire congregation moved their meetings to nearby Lochgilphead. While leading the church, he also continued his missionary tours, and when three Baptist missionary societies combined in 1827 the new organization assumed oversight of Sinclair's itinerant work. His responsibilities included preaching, setting churches in order, and ordaining new ministers.

While preaching at Lochgilphead, Sinclair baptized a young school teacher named James Black in 1817 at Loch Awe. Black lost his teaching position because of his baptism, and when he could not find suitable means of support he left Scotland for Canada three years later. Black later became the most prominent leader of the Disciples in Canada in the mid-1800s.

In 1825, when he was forty-eight, Dugald Sinclair married Christina Sinclair, who was only twenty-two. She was possibly a cousin, although this is uncertain. The couple remained in Lochgilphead for six more years, during this time members of the congregation continued leaving for Canada. McVicar had gone there earlier after he resigned as the church's pastor, and others who went later pressured Sinclair to go with them. For a long time he resisted, believing that the Lord wanted him to work in his native land. But as the church declined in numbers, he concluded that because "God has been pleased to withhold any success for so long a time" that "a new turn has been given to my mind, so that at present it seems to me an intimation of his will that I should go."

⁴ Edmund Sheppard, "Death of Elder Dugald Sinclair, of Canada," *Christian Standard*, November 5, 1870, 357.

The Sinclairs – Dugald, Christina, and their three young children, Dugald, Jr. (b. 1826), Maria (b. 1828), and John (b. 1829) sailed from Crinan Canal, near Lochgilphead, in 1831, probably a short time after Dugald’s fiftieth birthday.⁵ The Sinclairs and others traveling with them from Lochgilphead likely proceeded to Aldborough Township on the shores of Lake Erie, where Donald McVicar, James Black, and others from Lochgilphead had come years earlier. From there they went to Lobo Township in Middlesex County, a few miles west of London, Ontario. Baptists from Argyllshire had been meeting there for more than ten years. Dugald Sinclair and family stayed with the John Sinclair family while a log house was built for them.

Donald McVicar had preached on occasion for the Lobo church, but it is not known whether he was still alive when the Sinclairs arrived. Dugald Sinclair soon established a preaching circuit, which included four churches (probable starting dates in parentheses): Aldborough (about 1818), Mosa (about 1826), and Howard (about 1829). Traditions handed down in at least some of these churches mention Donald McVicar preaching in these places, suggesting that for a second time in his life Dugald Sinclair succeeded McVicar.

Little is known about Sinclair’s work in Canada for nearly twenty years after his arrival in Lobo. Hugh McColl (1837-1910), who lived in a neighboring township and who knew Sinclair, said, “He preached fluently and eloquently in both English and Gaelic.” McColl described him as kind and sympathetic but also very direct and personal. He was an unstinting worker, sometimes preaching two or three times on a Sunday. McColl says that Sinclair “always” preached without monetary compensation. During the early years, travel was especially difficult, often on mere trails through the forest. Joseph Ash, who knew Sinclair in his last years, described him as “an exceedingly staunch man; scrupulously conscientious, an eloquent speaker endowed with clear perception of ideas and principles; a fine scholar, and indefatigable in his labours.”

Despite his openness to new teaching, one way in which Sinclair never changed was in his conviction that only ordained men like him should preside at the Lord’s Supper. This came from his “English” Baptist background, and to his dying day, years after he accepted other principles of the Disciples, he held to this position.

About 1850, nearly two decades after he came to Canada, Sinclair met a young Disciples preacher named Edmund Sheppard (1823-1894), who lived about thirty-five miles away, not far from St. Thomas. Sheppard was from England and had studied at Bethany College under Alexander Campbell. In 1849 he moved to Dorchester Township near St. Thomas to teach school at a place that later became Mapleton and to evangelize in the surrounding area. Soon after his arrival he not only established a Disciples church in Dorchester but he also made his acquaintance with Dugald Sinclair. Their meeting may have been precipitated by the active encouragement of James Black.⁶ Years later, in 1870, Sheppard described it this way: “...having settled in a locality about 35 miles southeast of Lobo, and commenced the proclamation of the Gospel in the

⁵ Dugald and Christina had three children born in Scotland and five others, Malcolm (1832?), Colin (1834), Mary Ann (1836), Archibald (1838), and Duncan (1840), born in Canada. Malcolm’s birth date is uncertain, but the naming patterns suggest he was the third son. The first was named for his father, the second for his paternal grandfather, whose name, according to evidence cited by Donald E. Meek, was likely John, and the third for his maternal grandfather, who was named Malcolm. Most likely Malcolm was born soon after the family’s arrival in Canada, although it is possible that he was born shortly before they left Scotland.

⁶ Reuben Butchart states that he had seen some letters from Sinclair to Black that were extant in 1949. Unfortunately, he neither quotes the letters nor tells when they were written. Butchart, 394. Joseph Ash, writing long after the supposed events, thought that Black sent Sinclair copies of the *Millennial Harbinger* while Sinclair was living in Scotland. This is highly unlikely, for Sinclair left Scotland in 1831 and Black told the elders in Clinton that he did not begin reading Campbell’s writings until 1833. Joseph Ash, *Reminiscences*, 110; Letter from James Black to the Clinton Elders, 1840.

surrounding country (I) became acquainted with Bro. Sinclair about twenty years ago. He at once united in hearty co-operation, and the result has been the formation of some flourishing churches around that section of Ontario.”⁷

Within six or seven years of first meeting Sheppard, Sinclair aligned himself fully with the Disciples, and if not within that time frame at least not long afterward he and the churches he shepherded called themselves Disciples rather than Baptists. Fortunately, we have contemporary records which we will now examine to help us understand how all this came about.

In August 1852 Edmund Sheppard and James Black reported that in the early part of that month that they had preached two evenings at Lobo, “in the neighbourhood of Elder Sinclair, who had previously made the appointments. On both evenings the attendance was large. We could say much about the kindness and christian love manifested towards us by brother Sinclair and his family. We feel more than we can express, or than he would like to see expressed. No one can be in the company of this venerable servant of Christ without being benefitted.”⁸ No attempt was made in the report by Black and Sheppard, who were both well-acquainted with Sinclair, to further identify Sinclair for their readers, although, as we shall see, a later writer thought this important.

In April 1855, Sheppard, in a report of his own activities, said that this included “preaching in the West (Lobo area) among our staunch co-operators, the Scotch Baptists.”⁹ This makes it plain that by this time Anderson, Sinclair, and those associated with him realized that they had enough in common to work together.

Four months later, Alexander Campbell stopped in London, a few miles from Lobo, while on a tour among the Disciples in Canada West. There he visited with his former student, Edmund Sheppard and also met Dugald Sinclair, whom he described as “a venerable Baptist Elder of some 76 years old. He inherits a firm constitution, and is now pastor of four churches in old Baptist style.”¹⁰ How much Sheppard or others told Campbell about Sinclair’s beliefs and practices we do not know, but apparently Campbell did not consider him to be a Disciple.

In mid-June, 1856, John Butchart, Jr., who was on a preaching tour in southwestern Ontario, joined Sheppard, and the two of them toured among Christians in Aldborough, Howard, and Harwich townships where Sinclair had done much of his work. At Aldborough they attended a semi-annual meeting that included members from more distant localities. Here Butchart met Sinclair, who presided at the Lord’s Supper and addressed the assembly in Gaelic. Butchart felt constrained to tell his readers, at least “those who may not know much about these brethren,” who they were. He said “they have been and are still known as Baptists, (scotch Baptists we suppose) but they are really disciples of our Lord and Saviour, who is the great pattern to be followed.... Their number we cannot state; but, they are located in some seven or more townships, and enjoy the labours of elder Sinclair.... They are now occasionally visited by brother Sheppard, whose labours among them we trust will result in increasing their number, and tend to promote their spiritual growth, and their enjoyment of all divine things.”¹¹

⁷ Sheppard, *Christian Standard*.

⁸ *Christian Banner*, August 1852, 227.

⁹ *Christian Banner*, April 1855, 116. By “Scotch Baptists” the writer used “Scotch” as we would use “Scottish” and was not referring to the religious fellowship in Scotland called Scotch Baptists. Sinclair was never part of the Scotch Baptist church.

¹⁰ Alexander Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger*, September 1855, 529-537. In his article, Campbell called Sinclair “Elder St. Clair,” but it is clear that he refers to Elder Sinclair.

¹¹ *Christian Banner*, July 1856, 120-123.

If Sinclair and those associated with him were strangers to the Disciples fellowship when Butchart met them, this would change significantly a week later when Sinclair attended the June Meeting hosted by James Black's home church in Eramosa. Sinclair led a gathering of about five hundred in observing the Lord's supper at this annual meeting. Amos Clendennan from Louth on the Niagara Peninsula was present and was thrilled to be one of the five hundred "sitting down at the Lord's table. He made special note of the fact that it was "presided over by the venerable Elder Sinclair, an aged father in Israel" (now seventy-nine years old). "How pleasing to contemplate old veterans in the service of heaven."¹²

This was the first year that mention was made of Sinclair's attendance at a June Meeting, but he was present again the following year when the Dorchester church hosted it. The congregation borrowed the "great tent" that Disciples in Ohio used for similar gatherings. As many as 2500 people attended some of the sessions. Sinclair was a speaker at one of the Saturday sessions, and according to John Butchart, Jr., he gave an "energetic exhortation, urging the claims of the Saviour on the attention of both saints and sinners."¹³

There is every reason to believe that by 1857 the Ontario Disciples and Dugald Sinclair had fully embraced one another, although we cannot pinpoint the date when Sinclair and the churches in his circuit made the name change from Baptist to Disciples. Four years later when Lazarus Parkinson reported on one of these churches, he said it was "composed principally of old disciples, *formerly* (emphasis mine) known as Scotch Baptists, and in connexion with our much esteemed and venerable brother Dugald Sinclair, of Lobo...."¹⁴ This indicates that by this time the name change was complete – a fact verified by Sinclair himself when in his will written that same year (1861) he identified himself as "Preacher of the Christian Disciples Church." A memorial raised to him after his death similarly identifies him as "Elder of the Church of Christian Disciples." Sinclair himself apparently did not view this as evidence of significant change on his part, for, according to Edmund Sheppard, in his obituary of Sinclair, a few days before the latter died "he told his son that when he was baptized it was as a Disciple of Christ and that when he met with the people so designated he at once united with them."

Sinclair continued to preach within two Sundays of his death on Tuesday, October 18, 1870. Shortly before he died he said, "I have no pain, no disease, no trouble. Mine is not a spasmodical, nervous feeling, but a steady, firm, unchangeable reliance upon God and his promises. Saved by faith through grace, I'll soon see my Saviour- God and enjoy his promises."

During his time in Canada Sinclair not only served sacrificially as a minister for the Lord, but he also managed his earthly affairs prudently. By 1861, when he wrote his final will, he had acquired five hundred acres of land in Lot Three of the Eighth Concession of Lobo Township. He left all of this to his youngest son, Archibald, with detailed stipulations of how much Archibald had to provide annually for his mother and for his two sisters, both of whom were unmarried. All that was left to Archibald's three brothers was twenty dollars to Dugald, Jr., one cow to John, and three cows to Colin. Archibald was also instructed to build a house for his mother with "due regard to comfort and economy." Dugald Sinclair's wife, Christina, lived eighteen years after her husband's death, dying August 9, 1888.

¹² *Christian Banner*, July 1856, 111-115.

¹³ *Christian Banner*, July 1857, 216-218.

¹⁴ *Banner of Faith*, March-April 1861, 78.