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Scotch Preachers in Reformation Days

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Knox and His Brethren

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It is singular to think that John Knox, of I whom when he was buried the Regent of the Kingdom said, “Here lies one who never feared the face of clay,” was overwhelmed with distress and anxiety at the bare thought of being a preacher. And this was not in boyish days, as in the case of many a shy youth, to whom mounting the pulpit-stairs for the first time is something like mounting the steps of the gallows. For Knox was turned forty before he ever opened his mouth to a public congregation. His feeling was more like that of Saul when he hid himself among the stuff; or, to come nearer to the particular case, that of Gregory Nazianzen, when, on being ordained, in order to avoid the responsibilities of his office, fled to the wilderness; or that of Ephrem Syrus, when he feigned madness; or that of Ambrose, when, to shock the people, and make them think him unfit for the bishopric, he caused shady characters to be brought to his house as if in his company. The suspicion of heresy under which Knox had fallen, and the known desire of Cardinal Beaton for his life, had brought him to the humble vocation of domestic pedagogue—a kind of “Dominie Sampson” in the house of a Protestant gentleman, Hugh Douglas, of Longniddry. To the duties of this humble calling, however, Knox applied himself with all the energy and thoroughness of his nature. And in particular he sought to make the Bible lesson and the catechism interesting and impressive. And it was when, for safety, he

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took refuge in the castle of St. Andrews, and, being there, taught his boys in a public place, and when laymen, like Sir David Lindsay the poet, and Henry Halnaves the lawyer, saw how admirably he did this work, that they became convinced that the making of a good preacher was in him, and solemnly called him to become their pastor. Knox, to use a common phrase, was dreadfully “cut up;” the very thought took the life out of him for days; he could neither laugh nor talk, but went about in desolation and misery. It was neither want of physical nor of moral courage that oppressed him; but a sense of his unfitness to undertake so solemn an office, and to deliver God’s message to his countrymen at so vital a crisis of their history.

If anyone doubted his courage, he should have heard him a short time after, in the parish kirk of St. Andrews, when he preached his first sermon, after having undertaken to prove “that the Roman Kirk, as now corrupted, was but the Synagogue of Satan, and the ‘Pape’ thereof was the man of sin spoken of by the apostle.” It was an occasion of great excitement and expectation. The text was from the seventh chapter of Daniel, about the king that was to wear out the saints of the Most High, and think to change times and seasons. Knox did not mince the matter. The ashes of his beloved friend George Wishart had hardly been swept away from the neighbouring street, and the terror of his fate might well have kept more timid men, if not silent, at least temperate in their language; but Knox despised all such considerations. On this, the first occasion of his opening his mouth in public, the crimes and blasphemous pretensions of the papacy received as withering and scathing an exposure as ever they got in the heyday of Protestant ascendancy. Among his hearers

were the professors of the university, including the celebrated John Mair, also John Winram, superior of the Priory, and many canons and friars of various orders, to all, of whom he gave a challenge that if they alleged that he had said a word contrary to Scripture or to history, he would go fully into the matter with them, and convince them that he was thoroughly justified in it all.

The retribution on Knox came in a form that he did not expect. St. Andrews was taken by a French fleet that had come to the assistance of the governor; Knox was committed to a French galley, and for more than a year endured the miserable fate of a galley-slave. But though reduced by severe illness to extreme weakness, when at last he was set at liberty he went bravely at his preaching again. And it was not long before he got the honourable appointment of chaplain to King Edward VI. Of anything that he said when his words fell on royal ears, we have no direct information, but it was impossible for him to be anything but bold, honest, and brave. As it regarded the papacy, his message to the young king would doubtless be the echo of his first sermon. But that would only be on particular occasions. Knox had a gospel of salvation by free grace, which, like Luther, he delighted to proclaim. He had a theology of redemption, the value of which he knew personally right well, and which was in his eyes unspeakably glorious for the children of men. He had much to say of the beauty and glory of Him, "by whom alone" (to use the prayer of his communion service) "we have received liberty and life; by whom alone God does acknowledge us His children and heirs; by whom alone we are possessed in His spiritual kingdom to eat and drink at His table; with whom we have our conversation presently in heaven, and by whom our bodies shall be raised up again from the dust, and shall be placed with Him in that endless joy, which Thou, O Father of Mercy, hast prepared for Thine elect before the foundation of the world. And these most inestimable blessings we acknowledge to have received of Thy free mercy and grace by Thy only beloved Son Jesus, for which therefore we, Thy congregation, moved by Thy Holy Spirit, render Thee all thanks, glory and praise, for ever and ever."

Queen Mary could never be induced to hear Knox preach. This was a great disappointment to the reformers. It was a dreadful grief to them that the young queen was so stiff a papist; but they clung to the hope that if only she would hear the protestant clergy, she could not but change her views. The Mass was the great bugbear of the reformers, and Mary's persistent demand to have it celebrated in her chapel was a bitter pill. It is well known that Knox made little impression on her in private, and that the tears he drew from her were tears of disappointment and vexation, and by no means of penitence. When we consider that nearly all who heard the reformed doctrine in those days became persuaded of its truth, with the exception of persons who had a personal interest in the maintenance of the old cause, we need feel no surprise at the sanguine expectations entertained respecting the queen, if only she could have been persuaded to frequent the kirk. But her education had been too decided, her will was too firm, her interests in the Catholic cause too deep, and her relations and advisers too bigoted to have made it likely that even Knox would have changed her views.

Knox appears to have been one of those preachers that are very calm in the first part of their discourse, but that warm into extraordinary vehemence towards the close. In the first part he laid down the Scriptural foundations for all that he said. His one object was to bring out the divine warrant for his message. This he appears to have done in a calm, deliberate, orderly way. Like other preachers of the olden time, who thought that the Christian commonwealth should be as like as possible to the Hebrew theocracy, he made much use of the Old Testament. This eminently biblical style of preaching gave to the Scotch people an extraordinary interest in their

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Bibles, and at the same time took a great grip of their consciences. And when the preacher felt that he had a strong foundation in Scripture, he made his application with tremendous emphasis. In the case of Knox, all the resources of his natural eloquence gushed forth at the end. One of his comrades gives a graphic account of his preaching, even when he had a foot in the grave. It was at St. Andrews, to which place

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he had retired shortly before his death, Edinburgh being hardly safe for him. He describes him creeping along to the church in the decrepitude of age with a fur collar round his neck, a staff in one hand, and his servant, Richard Ballenden, with his hand under his arm supporting him on the other, and after being hoisted into the pulpit, being so weak that he had to lean over it to regain his breath. We are not prepared to be told that after half an hour’s quiet preaching, he so woke up at the end that he was like to knock the pulpit to pieces and leap out of it. Yet in this vehement old man there was a very saintly element. He chose as the subject of his last sermon, the crucifixion, on purpose to end his ministry “at the cross.” The passage he asked his wife to read to him when dying, was the seventeenth of John, where he had “first cast his anchor.” After one of his seasons of meditation, he declared he had been in heaven, and tasted the heavenly joy. It was a triumphant deathbed; his last words were, “Now, it is come.”

Of the preachers who followed Knox, the most remarkable by far was Robert Bruce, son of Sir Alexander Bruce, of Airth, near Stirling, one of the ancient barons of Scotland, who claimed connection with the royal family of Bruce. Robert was educated at Paris for the law; he had begun to practice in Edinburgh, and with so great promise that a design was formed to give him the place of a Lord of Session, the highest that his profession afforded. But all the while a strong feeling was working in his heart that he ought to devote himself to the ministry. He struggled against the feeling, knowing how much the change would offend his father and his family, till, one night, in his father’s house, he had an experience in bed that obliged him to give in. “It pleased God,” to use his own words, “to smite me inwardly and judicially in my conscience, and to present all my sins before me in such sort that He omitted not a circumstance, but made my conscience to see time, place, and persons as vividly as in the hour I did them. He made the devil accuse me audibly, that I heard his voice as vividly as ever I heard anything, not being sleeping, but waking. So far as he spoke true, my conscience bare him record, and testified against me very clearly; but when he came to be a false accuser, and laid things to my charge which I had never done, then my conscience failed him, and would not testify with him; but in these things which were true my conscience condemned me, and the condemnator tormented me, and made me feel the wrath of God pressing me down, as it were, to the lower hell. Yea, I was so fearfully and extremely tormented that I would have been content to be cast into a cauldron of hot melted lead to have had my soul relieved of that insupportable weight. Always, so far as he spoke true, I confessed, restored God to His glory, and cried God’s mercy for the merits of Christ. Yea, I appealed ever to His mercy purchased to me by the blood, death, and passion of Christ.” Before morning the weight was entirely removed, and Bruce had begun to know the peace of the forgiven.

The anecdote is a very characteristic one. It shows what profound views both of sin and grace prevailed in those days; and it shows also very clearly that the cross of Christ, the atoning work of the great Redeemer, is the only provision that can meet the case of a conscience torn by a sense of sin. Bruce’s views of truth were, all his life, very thorough and profound; it took a deep,

firm hold of himself, and this enabled him to preach it so that it went deep into the heart of many a hearer.

Bruce had a remarkable reputation for wisdom, in consequence of which, early in life, he was called to two remarkable’ positions of trust. In 1588, when the country was agitated by the news of the Spanish Armada, and before he had begun his ministry, he was appointed Moderator of the General Assembly; and the following year, being then an acting minister in Edinburgh, on occasion of the king’s going to Norway to bring home his bride, he was named one of the king’s councillors or commissioners for managing the kingdom in his absence; and in this office, amid many difficulties, he managed matters with such skill as to receive the very hearty thanks of the king on his return. But the royal favour was of short continuance. Bruce was too faithful and fearless a preacher to be always a favourite at court. Some minor differences had been in a manner settled; but in 1603, for refusing to give thanks for the king’s deliverance from the Gowrie conspiracy in the very terms the king desired, he and other brethren were banished from Edinburgh. And the banishment proved a perpetual one, so far as the capital was concerned. Bruce led a wandering life, doing great spiritual service as a preacher, both in the Highlands and Lowlands of Scotland; the only indulgence granted him being liberty in his old age to preach in the church of Larbert, near Stirling, his patrimonial estate of Kinnaird being situated in that parish. Four years of his banishment were spent in Inverness. The magistrates and others were very unkind to him, but his popularity and success as a minister were amazing. The Highland love of strong, searching preaching must have received a great impulse under him. The kilted mountaineers came from far distant places, sometimes crossing arms of the sea to enjoy the privilege of his ministrations. The testimony borne to his power by distinguished writers is remarkable. “He was a terror to evildoers,” says one, “and the authority of God did so appear in him and in his carriage (bearing), with such a majesty in his countenance as forced fear and respect from the greatest in the land, even those who were avowed haters of godliness.” “No man, in his time,” says another, “spoke with such evidence and power of the Spirit; no man had so many seals of conversion; yea, many among his hearers thought that no man since the apostles spake with such power…. He had a very majestic countenance, and whatever he spake in public or private—yea, when he read the word, I thought it had such a force I never discerned in any other man.”

In the words of an old biographer, we give two anecdotes, the one illustrating the source of

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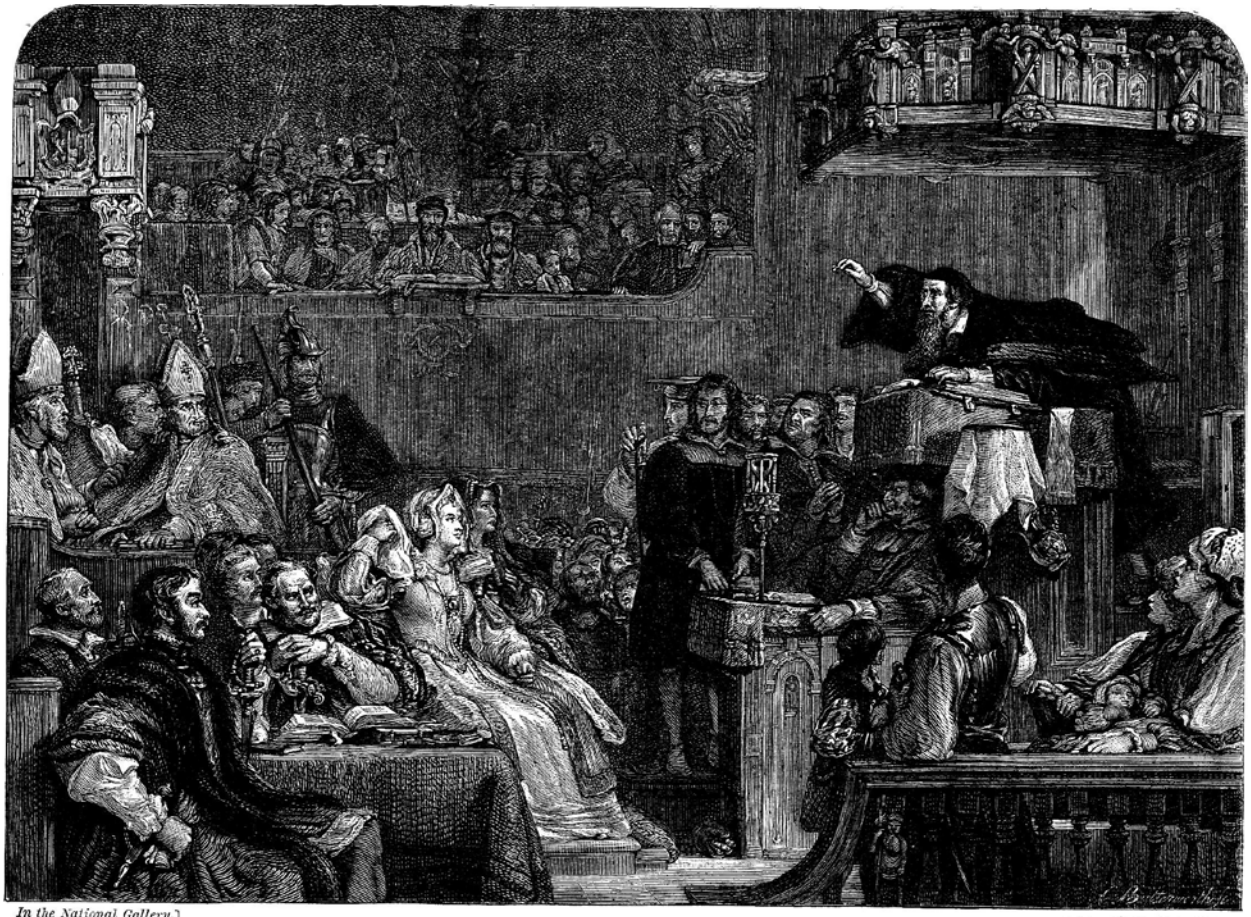

In the National Gallery.] THE PREACHING OF KNOX BEFORE THE LORDS OF THE CONGREGATION. *June* 10, 1559. *[After Sir David Wilkie.*

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his preaching power, the other the calm repose of his dying soul on the word which he had proclaimed so well.

“When he preached at Larhert Kirk, there was, nearby, a chamber, where he used to go in between sermons. One day some noblemen and gentlemen who had been hearing him, wearied between sermons, when he stayed longer than usual. They having a good way to ride after sermon, they called for the bell-man, and desired him to go to him in the little room where he was retired, and knock softly at the door, and, if he opened, to acquaint ‘him they desired he might begin as soon as conveniently he could, because some of them had far to ride. The bell-man did as he was commanded; but Mr. Bruce was so taken up in wrestling, that he did not hear him. However, the bell-man, when at the door, heard some of Mr. Bruce’s words, which, poor man, he did not understand; and so he came back to those that sent him, and told that he did not know when the minister would come out. He believed there was somebody with him, for he heard him many times say, with the greatest seriousness, ‘that he would not, he could not go, unless he came with him, and that he would not go alone’; adding that he never heard the other answer him a word.”

The biographer adds that that afternoon he preached with remarkable power, to the great benefit of many.

The anecdote of his death-bed is as follows: “When his sight failed him, he called for the large house Bible, and caused one of his family to put his finger on the twenty-eighth verse of the eighth chapter to the Romans, and told them that he died in the faith of what was in that chapter, and firmly believed that all things, even death itself, should work together for his good; and, in a little, slept in Jesus.”

Another very notable preacher in those times was John Welch, of Ayr. His father owned a property in Nithsdale, Dumfriesshire, but the first we hear of his son is that he associated himself with a band of border thieves. It was not long before he had had enough of that life. When he found his way back to his father’s house, it was not to be welcomed like the prodigal son. An aunt interceded for him, but with little success at first, the father remarking, in answer to her question whether he had lately heard anything of John, that the first news he expected to hear of him was that he had been hanged as a thief. The change that came over the boy was memorable. He became one of the most devout and holy men of his time. When he became a minister, he is said to have spent a third of his time in prayer. At night, when minister of Ayr, he would retire to the church, and spend hours in earnest prayer for Scotland. It was even said, that his knees became horny because he was so much upon them. When he first settled at Ayr, his earnest religion was so offensive, that none of the people would let him a house. The people were so wild, that fighting in the streets was not uncommon. Welch would rush out with a helmet on his head when he heard of a fight, go between the combatants, and in God’s name, entreat them to be reconciled. Ere long, the spirit of the people changed, his ministry was most effectual, and the dislike of the people changed into warm regard and affection. But through the troubles of the time, his connection with Ayr soon came to a close.

Welch, who was a strict Presbyterian, was one of a number of ministers who had met at Aberdeen as a General Assembly, in opposition to a royal proclamation forbidding the meeting. For this offence, he and others were sentenced to be hanged. After an imprisonment in Blackness Castle, the sentence was commuted into one of banishment. On the 7th of November, 1606, he sailed from Leith for France, accompanied by his wife, who was a daughter of John Knox, a great crowd attending at two o’clock in the morning, in the depth of winter, to witness the embarcation, and bid him and the others farewell. They sang the twenty-third Psalm, the last that Welch ever joined in singing in his native land. Welch resided in France for sixteen years. It is said that on one occasion, when spending a night in an inn, the room which he occupied was divided by only a thin partition from another, which was occupied by a priest. During the night the priest heard his neighbour in such earnest communion with God, that he made himself known to him in the morning, and was converted through his instrumentality. Welch was minister of the town of St. Jean d’Angely, when it was besieged by Louis XIII. in person. He helped to defend the town with conspicuous bravery. A shell having burst in the room where he was, he refused to leave it until he had knelt down and given thanks. Another time, when carrying powder to a gun, a cannon-ball carried off the powder-ladle from his hands; on which he coolly took off his hat, filled it with powder, and carried it to the gunner, who directed his shot with such precision that the enemy’s cannon was silenced. When the town capitulated, and the king entered it, his majesty expressed his displeasure, because Welch continued to preach. The Duke d’Espernon was sent to summon the preacher into the royal presence, but on appearing at Mr. Welch’s house, the minister, in a

voice of authority, called on him to sit down and hear the word of God. The duke obeyed, and Welch addressed to him a solemn message. When the king demanded of him how he dared to violate the custom of the nation by preaching where the court was residing, he told his majesty, that if he knew what he preached, he would not only come and hear it, but make all France come too. Then he explained how he preached the gospel of grace, and not salvation by works; and moreover, how, unlike the priests, he preached that in France the king was above the pope, and that the pope had no jurisdiction in his kingdom. For once the king appreciated Protestant doctrine. Louis was much more friendly to Welch than his own sovereign. In 1622, he came to London, and asked to be allowed to return to Scotland. Among those who interceded for him was his wife. The king asked her who she was? She said, the daughter of John Knox. “Knox and Welch,” said the king, “the devil never made such a

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match as that.” “Very likely,” said she, “for we never speired [asked] his leave.” The king said her husband might return if he would submit to the bishops. Holding up her apron, she said, “Please your majesty, I’d rather kep [catch] his head there.”

Knox, Bruce, and Welch are notable specimens of the ministry that reared the Reformed Church in Scotland. They were intense students of God’s word. They had got far above the fear of man, and were marked by a spirit of energy and daring that no terrors could daunt. It was a rude age and a rude country, and, judged by modern standards, their language and hearing often seemed unjustifiable; but nothing has ever been proved against them that can show that they were not true lovers of their country, and faithful servants of their God.
