

The Scottish Reformation, 1560-1960

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In October of this year Her Majesty the Queen will make history by attending the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland—a special meeting of the Assembly convened to commemorate the fourth centenary of the Scottish Reformation. This will be the first occasion since the Union of the Crowns in 1603 that the Sovereign has attended the General Assembly in person. She will attend it, not as Head of the Church of Scotland (for in the Church of Scotland, as Andrew Melville reminded her ancestor King James VI and I, the Sovereign is 'not a king, nor a lord, nor a head, but a member') but as the Queen of Scots, visiting the Assembly and welcomed with all appropriate honour, but incapable, by virtue of the Church's constitution, of taking any part in the Assembly's deliberations.

This notable anniversary is being marked in a number of other ways., including the publication of several important books. Two of these have been produced by the Moderators of the General Assemblies of the two leading Presbyterian Churches in Scotland (both Moderators this year are Professors of Church History)—*A Church History of Scotland*, by Principal J. H. S. Burleigh of the Church of Scotland, and *The Story of the Scottish Reformation*, by Professor A. M. Renwick of the Free Church of Scotland. In addition two notable works by a Scottish Episcopalian should also be mentioned—*The Scottish Reformation and Scotland: Church and Nation through. Sixteen Centuries*, by Dr. Gordon Donaldson, Reader in Scottish History in Edinburgh University. Of these, readers of *The Witness* will find special interest in Professor Renwick's work, which is published by the I.V.F. at 4s. in their 'Pocket Book' series of paperbacks.

On August 17, 1560, the Scottish Parliament, by a large majority and with great enthusiasm, adopted a Confession of Faith which had been drawn up within the previous week by John Knox and five of his fellow-Reformers, all of whom bore the same Christian name as himself. The Scottish Reformation, which was already sweeping irresistibly through the land, thus received constitutional recognition. One week later, Parliament completed its recognition of the Reformed religion by passing three further Acts—one repealing all previous enactments which were contrary to the Word of God and the newly adopted Confession, a second abolishing the Pope's jurisdiction in Scotland, and a third banning the Roman Mass.

In these enactments the Parliament of Scotland was but giving effect to the will of the people of Scotland. Whether there is any substance or not in the frequent statement that the English Reformation was imposed upon the people from above (and there is much less substance in it than is widely supposed), there is no doubt that the Scottish Reformation was a popular movement. Between two and three centuries earlier, the Wycliffite revival influenced Scotland, and had

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its martyrs north as well as south of the Border. The later of the two Wycliffite Bibles appeared in a Scottish edition, edited by Murdoch Nisbet. But the Wycliffite revival did not avail to check the declension of the Church in Scotland. The Reformation did not mean the setting up of a new Church in Scotland, but it did mean that the Church of Scotland had its face vigorously scrubbed to remove the encrusted accumulation of centuries.

To give but one sample of the abuses under which the Scottish Church suffered on the eve of the Reformation, consider how the most responsible offices in the Church were staffed. James V, at the age of twenty (in 1531 or thereby), wrote to the Pope expressing his concern for the material welfare of his three illegitimate sons. He asked the Pope to permit their promotion to any office in the Church, with the limiting proviso that they should not become bishops or archbishops before they reached the age of twenty. And the Pope authorized him to distribute Scotland's leading abbeys among them.

In such a situation revolt was bound to come, but it might have come in quite a different way from the form which it took. Revolt is not necessarily Reformation. Reformation in the sense in which we are using the term now means 'Reformation according to the Word of God'. And the Reformation was, first and foremost, a great movement of the Spirit of God. It had, in Scotland as elsewhere, its undesirable concomitants. We may think of the civil strife in which one party invoked French aid and the other relied upon English aid; we may deplore the rapacity of the great landowners which largely frustrated Knox's plans for diverting the ecclesiastical revenues to the education of the people, and the excesses of the 'rascal multitude', as Knox put it, by which much fine architecture suffered irreparable damage. But to the Reformation itself we may well look back with gratitude and admiration.

The new English Bible, translated by Tyndale, was widely welcomed in Scotland, and wherever it was read the disparity between prevailing ecclesiastical practice and the apostolic example was plainly to be seen. But above all, the fundamental truth of justification by faith was rediscovered. Here men found a gospel to live by, and a gospel to die by as well, for the truth which they rediscovered was condemned as Lutheran heresy, and Scotland has its Reformation martyrs in Patrick Hamilton, George Wishart, and Walter Myln. But the truth prevailed, and it was the liberating power of this gospel of free grace that gave the Scottish Reformation its nation-wide impetus. A new wind blew throughout the land and dispelled the fog which had for too long enwrapped the minds of men and women.

The Confession of Faith which the six Johns drew up between August 10 and 17, 1560, is a document worth studying even today. It is not to be confused with the Westminster Confession of Faith, drawn up over eighty years later, which is the principal subordinate standard of historic Presbyterianism throughout the world. The Confession of 1560, the 'Scots Confession' as it is commonly called, consists of 25 articles compiled with inevitable haste, but compiled by men who were tremendously conscious of their responsibility to God and to their fellows: Their consuming desire is that the Word of God shall have right of way, and they beg any reader who sees in their Confession anything

repugnant to that Word 'of his gentleness and for Christian charity's sake' to draw their attention to it in writing, that suitable amendment may be made.

John Knox had spent some fruitful years at Geneva, in the company of John Calvin, and he found there what he described as the most perfect school of Christ since the days of the apostles. But when it came to reforming the' Scottish Church, not Geneva but the Holy Scriptures must be his standard: Of him and his colleagues a seventeenth-century historian. 'They took not their pattern from any kirk in the world; no, not from Geneva itself; but laying God's Word before them made reformation thereunto.'

The worthy celebration of a movement in which the Spirit of God and the Word of God were so active is something in which all Christians may well rejoice. But we should be unfaithful to the memory of the Reformers if we did not take upon ourselves anew the obligation which they regarded so seriously. Reformation according to the Word of God is not something that can be accomplished once and for all. A Church thus reformed (whether Presbyterian or not) is a Church which stands in need of continuous reformation. To rest content with what was achieved in the sixteenth Century, or in the nineteenth century, is to betray the heritage of the Reformers. Perhaps they did not see everything clearly, but they were faithful to what they saw. The Lord has yet more light to break forth from His holy Word, and the worthiest commemoration of the Reformers is to set ourselves to be as faithful to the light which has broken forth upon us as they were to the light which broke forth on them.

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