

For Christ's Crown and Covenant: The Scottish Presbyterians

Last time we looked at the English Puritans. In this lesson we will look at the very close spiritual relatives of the English Puritans—the Scottish Presbyterians—and particularly the history of Scottish Presbyterians in the seventeenth century. Scotland is famous for its use of psalms in worship. I was hiking on the Isles of Skye, Lewis, and Harris last summer. I enjoyed attending the Free Church of Scotland services and singing the Psalms. They sing the Psalms in Gaelic as well as English. Today, I am going to read one of the Psalms in English as the basis for our prayer together. It is Psalm 100:3. Let us join together in prayer. Pray along with me as I read these words. Let us pray.

“O my soul, bless God, the Father. All that is within me, bless His name, bless the Father and forget not all His mercies to proclaim. As it was without beginning, so at last without an end to their children’s children ever shall His righteousness extend unto such as keep His covenant and are steadfast in His way, unto those who still remember His commandments and obey. Bless the Father, all His creatures ever under His control all throughout His vast dominion, bless the Father, O my soul. Amen.”

I would like to begin with one of the heroes of Scottish history. It is a little dog by the name of “Bobby.” He is actually called “Great Briars Bobby.” If you walk along the royal mall in Edinburgh, you will come to the statue of this little Skye terrier. For 16 years, Bobby kept daily watch over the grave of his master who was buried near the statue in Great Briars churchyard. In that same churchyard, over 200 years before Bobby’s time, something very important happened in Scottish Presbyterian Church history, which we are going to be talking about a little later in this lesson.

We have studied the Reformation in Scotland, but we really need to talk about two reformations in Scotland: the First Reformation and the Second. John Knox was the primary figure in the First Reformation, which was the reform of the church from Catholicism. The theme of that reformation was “None but Christ saves.” The Scottish Church, under Knox’s leadership, recovered a proper understanding of the Gospel. But, it was necessary in Scotland for the church to go through what is usually called the Second Reformation, which was not against Catholicism but against Erastianism and fallacy. The slogan that we could use to summarize the Second Reformation would be “None but Christ reigns in His Church.” It was out of the Second Scottish Reformation that the words so often used in Scottish church history came: for Christ’s crown and covenant. We will talk about that in the next few minutes.

I want to divide this period of Scottish Church history into two parts. The first part is from the death of John Knox in 1572 to the Restoration of the Stuarts in 1660, the period of the Second Reformation. The second part is the period from The Restoration in 1660 to the Glorious Revolution of William and Mary in 1688, which is the period of the Covenanters. So, we will be talking first about the Second Reformation and then the Covenanters.

In order to survey that almost 100 years from the death of Knox to the Restoration of the Stuarts, I would like to describe a few of the leaders of that period and a number of the main events that took place. The greatest Scottish Presbyterian leader after the time of John Knox was Andrew Melville. Melville completed what John Knox began. It was really under the leadership of Andrew Melville that Scottish Presbyterianism was perfected in *The Second Book of Discipline* of 1581. It was also Andrew Melville who led the fight on the part of the Scottish Presbyterians to have authority within their own church without the interference and control of an Erastian state, without the control of the king. This was a difficult struggle for a long time, as the king attempted to control and at times suppress the church and

the church fought to establish its freedom from the control of the state. It was a famous meeting between Andrew Melville and King James in 1596 in which the Presbyterian preacher called the king “God’s silly vassal” to his face. The word “silly” probably did not have the same meaning that it has to us today. It meant something like, “God’s feeble servant.” Andrew Melville wanted to make it very clear to King James that he was God’s servant, and as God’s servant, he was a member of the church like everyone else, but he could not dictate or control the church. Melville reminded King James many times that there are two kings and two kingdoms in Scotland: King James, the lord of the Commonwealth, and Christ Jesus, who is king of His church. Well, the struggle between Melville and James continued until the Presbyterian preacher (Andrew Melville) was exiled by King James to the tower of London in 1607. He remained there until he died in 1622.

Another great leader of this period was Robert Bruce. He is a man with a famous name. Robert Lee Bruce is one of the great heroes of Scottish history and the struggle of Scotland. William Wallace and Robert Bruce were Independents from England. This Robert Bruce, who came later, was a descendent of the Scottish king. He was a Presbyterian preacher. He was a man with a famous name and also the successor of a famous man because Robert Bruce was the successor to John Knox, his pastor of the great national kirk, Saint Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh.

Robert Bruce was one of the great preachers of his time. He stressed brevity and clarity. He would often say in his sermons, “I shall be short by God’s grace.” I suppose a preacher realizes that he needs God to be short. That was rather unusual for that time. Most sermons went on and on. However, Robert Bruce tried to say it briefly, and he would say, “By God’s grace, I shall make it clear.” These are great prayers for any of us who are called to preach—to be short and to be clear.

Robert Bruce preached at the famous 1592 General Assembly when Presbyterianism again prevailed in the land after some years of Erastian control of the church. In 1592, the General Assembly met, and it looked like Presbyterianism would again rise above its enemies. Robert Bruce preached to James VI, the king of Scotland who in a few years would also become the king of England—James I of England. Curiously enough, the text that Robert Bruce chose to use on that occasion was James 1:6. I think that was probably purely incidental that it worked out that way. It was the content of the text that interested Bruce. It says, “He that wavereth is like a wave of the sea.” The king had finally come to agree with the demands of the General Assembly. However, Robert Bruce wanted to get across a message that the king could waver and change his mind again, which he did again before much longer. Robert Bruce was exiled twice by King James. Actually, he was exiled more than twice. On two occasions, he was sent to the north of Scotland to Inverness, which was far from Edinburgh and out of the way. The king felt that the influence of Bruce would not be felt as keenly if he was not in the capital of Edinburgh. However, up in the north, Robert Bruce became the pioneer apostle or preacher of the Gospel in the Highland of Scotland. On another occasion, Robert Bruce was sent by the king to France. He was a worthy servant of God as was Andrew Melville.

I would like to talk next about a sermon. This was a famous sermon that took place in Scotland during this time. This was a sermon at the Kirk o’Shotts, a parish church midway between Glasgow and Edinburgh, high up in the Moorlands. This is a sermon that was preached on June 21, 1630. It was communion season at this church. Scottish history communion is not observed frequently—once or twice a year. When communion was observed in this period of Scottish Presbyterian history, it was a grand celebration of a week or so of services—preparation services, communion itself, and a thanksgiving service on the Monday following communion. Robert Bruce had preached on Sunday at this church, but the famous sermon was not the one that the great preacher, Robert Bruce, preached on

Sunday. It was the one that was preached on Monday by a young 27-year-old probationer, licentious yet ordained—a minister-to-be by the name of John Livingston.

Livingston preached the thanksgiving service on Monday at the Kirk o' Shotts. The service was held in the churchyard because too many people attended for it to be held inside the church. We know the text that John Livingston used, and we know just one sentence from that sermon. The text was Ezekiel 36:25, "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you and ye shall be clean." John Livingston, this young minister, was preaching that in the churchyard to a large crowd of people when it began to rain a little bit as it often does in Scotland. As it rained, the congregation began, in the language of the time, to stickle a little, which means "to become a little disconcerted" because they were getting wet. The one sentence that was preserved from John Livingston's sermon was this: "What a mercy it is that the Lord sifts that rain through these heavens on us and does not rain down fire and brimstone as he did upon Sodom and Gomorrah." This is the only sentence from the sermon that we know, but we do know that 500 people marked that day as the day of their saving change, as they put it—the day of their conversion. That sermon preached in the churchyard at the Kirk o' Shotts prepared a whole generation of Scottish ministers to fight the battles of the Lord in the coming years. As one writer has said, "To this day of revival at the Kirk o' Shotts must be traced the springs of that covenanting testimony which was given during the generation that followed."

Next, we come to another man who figured in the history of this time—Alexander Henderson. Robert Bruce was the instrument by which the torch was passed on from John Knox, a man whom Bruce met. Bruce was a young man; Knox was an old man. They met in Saint Andrews in 1571, the year before Knox died. Bruce passed the torch that he had received from John Knox on to Alexander Henderson whom Robert Bruce greatly influenced in his old age. It was Alexander Henderson who became the leader of the church of the Second Reformation.

At first, Henderson was not sympathetic to the Presbyterian cause. He was already a minister, but he was a member of what was called the Prelatic or Episcopal party. They supported the king against the Presbyterians. He attended a communion service in about 1615 conducted by Robert Bruce. In order not to be observed (since he was not sympathetic to Bruce and his cause), Henderson crept into a dark corner under one of the galleries of the church. He hid there, hoping to be unobserved, in order to hear what this Presbyterian minister would say. Bruce's text was John 10:1 that day. It says, "He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold but climbeth up some other way is a thief and a robber." Those words went like drawn swords to Henderson's conscience. That day he reckoned as the day of his conversion. So, the minister was converted by that sermon and that text, and he became a great leader of the Second Reformation in Scotland.

Another man was Samuel Rutherford. Rutherford was a minister of the parish of Anwoth on the Galloway. Someone wrote about him, "He was always visiting the sick, always praying, always preaching, always studying." I do not know how he did that. I would like to have his secret. Somehow he impressed people that he was always doing all of these things. In 1636, Rutherford was exiled to Aberdeen by the king's party in order to silence his preaching. He was still in Scotland but across the country from his parish.

Rutherford was silenced but not as far as his letter writing was concerned. It was from Aberdeen that Rutherford wrote many of the great letters that were eventually published in 1664. Rutherford's letters, in which he poured out his heart to a whole range of correspondents, form one of the treasures of Reformed and Presbyterian devotional literature. The hymn, "The Sands of Time are Sinking," by Anne

Cousin is based on one of Rutherford's letters as is the little volume published by Banner of Trust called *Grace in Winter*.

Later, Rutherford was released from his exile when the Presbyterian cause began to rise to ascendancy again in Scotland. Samuel Rutherford became one of the Scottish commissioners to the Westminster Assembly. We will talk about the Assembly in a later lesson. While he was in London for the Assembly, he wrote a very famous book called *Lex Rex* (The Law is King). This was a book Francis Schaeffer often liked to talk about because he felt that this was one of the important books of church history, which it certainly is. If you would read the letters of Rutherford and read *Lex Rex*, you would not think it would be possible for one person to write both of those books. In the letters, there is the height of emotional intensity. On the other hand, *Lex Rex* has the emotional level found in the multiplication table. It is a very technical and, at first, dry book. For constitutional history, it is of great significance. "The Law is king—the law of God and the law of the land—is king," said Rutherford, "even above *the* king"—the Stuart king who claimed the divine right of kingship. "Government is from God. The form of government is from the people. And everyone, including the king, must obey the law." This was a very important message for Rutherford's day, and it is a very important message for our day as well.

When the Stuart kings came back in 1660, Rutherford was on the list of those ministers to be tried for treason because of *Lex Rex*. The Restoration was in 1660. Rutherford died the next year in 1661 before he could appear before the Privy Council to answer the charge of treason. In fact, the king's agents had come to arrest Rutherford and take him to London for trial. His answer was, "Tell them who sent you that I have got a summons already before a superior judicatory." He died and went to heaven rather than to London.

In 1638 when Samuel Rutherford was still in exile in Aberdeen, things began to turn around for the Scottish Presbyterian cause. The National Covenant was drawn up in the churchyard of Great Briars Church in Edinburgh where Bobby now sits on his statue. The tide actually began to turn the preceding year. There was a service at the national kirk on July 23, 1637. The minister at Saint Giles attempted to read Archbishop Laud's liturgy. That was not the usual Presbyterian worship service drawn up by John Knox and the others during the time of the Reformation. This was an English service based on the *Book of Common Prayer* but with changes in the High Church direction. When the minister at Saint Giles attempted to read Laud's liturgy, a riot broke out in the church. According to tradition, it started because of a woman named Jenny Geddes. People brought their own chairs to church in those days. There were not pews. Jenny Geddes had a little three-legged stool she was sitting on. When she realized this was not the Presbyterian service, she picked up the stool and threw it at the dean who was reading the liturgy. I am not sure that that really happened, but according to Dr. Warfield, the picturesque legend of Jenny Geddes and her stool has almost attained the dignity of history. You can actually go to Edinburgh and visit the national museum and see a three-legged stool like the one that Jenny Geddes threw at the head of the dean. Whatever happened that day, something did happen in church, and soon there was a revolution all over Scotland. People had all they could take of episcopacy and the Stuart kings.

So, the tide began to turn, which led to the great Glasgow Assembly of 1638 when Presbyterianism was again established in the land as the faith of the people. In 1643, the famous Solemn League and Covenant was drawn up between Scotland and England for the preservation of the Reformed religion in Scotland and the reformation of religion in England and Ireland. As we will see later in more detail, this brought the Scottish Presbyterians in league with the English Puritans at the Westminster Assembly in the 1640s, which led into the Commonwealth of the 1650s.

That was a brief survey of the history from the death of John Knox to the time of the Commonwealth, but we need to take a second step now and look at the history from the Restoration of 1660 to The Glorious Revolution of 1688.

The Restoration, of course, meant that the Commonwealth was over. It had failed, and the Stuart king returned to the throne. The Stuarts returned to the throne of Scotland and of England. By that time, the throne was united, although the Parliaments had not yet been united. The Restoration meant that the Episcopalians were again in control in Scotland. According to the Presbyterians, it was a period not of reformation of the church but of deformation of the church. It was not as bad as the Presbyterians made it out to be. It was certainly not a time of great spiritual progress in Scotland. However, on the Episcopal side, there were some great names of people of compassion and piety. Although many ministers were not worthy, we can point to some who were, including Robert Layton, who was an Episcopal bishop in Scotland. Charles Spurgeon described his commentary on I Peter as a truly heavenly work. There was also Henry Scougal, who was a professor at King's College in Aberdeen when he was 20 years old. He died when he was 28. His little book, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, which had such great influence on George Whitefield later, is one of the great treasures of Scottish, Christian literature.

During this period, the Presbyterians did something that Presbyterians often do: they divided. There were two parties within the Presbyterian Church: a party that was more moderate called "The Resolutioners" and a stricter party called "The Protesters," who formed the group that we generally call "The Covenanters." The division was not over doctrine or worship or anything like that. It was over policy and how to face the new political situation (whether to accommodate it and hope to gain a greater role for the Presbyterians as the Resolutioners hoped or to hold out in strict opposition to it as the Protesters insisted.)

What happened during this period from the Restoration to the Glorious Revolution was that many, many ministers and people in Scotland suffered a great deal. There were "outed" ministers and secret conventicles. Ministers who were expelled from the church because they would not agree with the Episcopal policies and control of the church during this time were called "outed" ministers. They went and preached outside. It was now illegal to conduct a Presbyterian form of worship in Scotland. So, the preaching services had to be in secret, hidden away in the Highlands and Moorlands of Scotland. Many of those ministers were eventually put into a prison—a place called Bass Rock off the coast of East Lothian. It is just a big rock out in the North Sea. You can see it from the coast. Now, it is a place with a lighthouse and a lot of birds on it, but at one time it was a prison for Covenanters. It became, in the words of Robert Louis Stevenson, "almost like a part of heaven," because the Covenanters in the dungeons united their voices in praise and sang Psalms and prayed to God. Some of the Covenanters became militant in their attempt to defend themselves, so there were Covenanting armies and battles.

The battles of Rullion Green and Pentland Rising in 1666 and Bothwell Bridge in 1679 were battles in which Covenanter armies went out to fight but lost because the Covenanters could not really fight as the king's armies could. This period in Scottish history is called "The Killing Time." Thousands were killed and vanished, including some ministers and many humble people like the two Margarets who were drowned in the Solway. According to the poet, the two Margarets "lived unknown until persecution dragged them into fame and chased them up to heaven." It all came to an end at the Glorious Revolution of 1688 when William and Mary arrived to take over the throne of England and Scotland. In 1688 and 1689, Presbyterianism was finally established again as the national religion of Scotland and Anglicanism as the national religion of England.

Let me say just a little bit about judging the Covenanters. If you read much in literature, even Scottish literature, you will find the Covenanters almost always described as fanatical, hardheaded, rigid, and bigoted people. The novels of Sir Walter Scott, *Old Mortality* and *The Heart of Midlothian*, set forth that view as does the book by John Buchan called *Witch Wood* and the novel by Josephine Tey called *The Daughter of Time* in which the Covenanters are compared to the equivalent of today's Irish Republican Army (IRA). Even though the Covenanters could be extreme, did take up arms, did at times fight, and perhaps were fanatical, those views simply overlook much of what needs to be understood about the history of the Covenanters.

The Covenanters are presented more positively in the writings of another Scottish novelist, Robert Louis Stevenson. John T. McNeal, the American professor of church history, got it right when he said, "Some of the Covenanters were extreme and violent, but it stands to their credit that they alone had the courage to challenge the oppressive policies of the later Stuarts long before James II so antagonized all Britain as to bring on the Great Revolution of 1688"—that is, the Glorious Revolution led by William, Prince of Orange in the Netherlands and Mary, who was the eldest daughter of James II so that she was a direct descendent of the Stuart kings. The coming of William and Mary led to the Toleration Act of 1689 in which the Presbyterian Church was established in Scotland. There was a minority of Presbyterians who refused to accept that establishment because they felt that the covenants had not been properly treated in the establishment. This formed the tradition known as the Reformed Presbyterian Church or the Covenanter Church.

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about John Blackadder, who died a prisoner on Bass Rock, or William Guthrie, who wrote *The Christian's Great Interest*, or John Fraser, the laird of Brey whose memoirs blessed generations, or Robert Trail, who preached the doctrines of grace in both the kingdom of England and Scotland.

Let me clarify what happened at the service in Saint Giles. The service in Saint Giles was in 1637, and a liturgy based on the *English Book of Common Prayer* was being read. You might think, "Why get upset over that?" After all, I have said some very nice things about the *English Book of Common Prayer*. It is a wonderful book, but it was not what people were used to. They knew that behind the reading of this English liturgy was the control of Archbishop Laud and the king. I remember Dr. Bussell taught me here some years ago both church history and systematic theology. He told the story once about a Presbyterian who went to an Episcopal Church. The Presbyterian was going to preach for the rector. They met before the service, and the Episcopalian pointed to a robe and said, "You will be wearing this robe when you go out to preach." This particular Presbyterian said, "Do I have to wear that thing?" And the Episcopalian minister said, "Well, no, not if you do not want to." So, the Presbyterian said, "All right, then I will wear it!" I think that is what was happening in Scotland. It was not that it was bad, but it was being imposed since it was not coming from the General Assembly but from the king and the archbishop. The Lord is the Lord in His church and He speaks through the courts of the church, the people believed. No one had a right to impose a service, even a good service, on the church without the permission of the church. So, that started the tumult, which led to the signing of the National Covenant the next year in the churchyard at Great Briars. The National Covenant was basically a covenant saying, "We will resist episcopacy, fallacy, Roman Catholicism, and everything else that is not Reformed and Presbyterian."

The question has been asked, "What are the *First and Second Books of Discipline*?" *The First Book of Discipline* was written by John Knox and the others. It is Presbyterian. However, in Andrew Melville's *Second Book of Discipline*, the Presbyterian system is more fully set forth as a system in which Presbyterianism is revealed by God and that anything else is unacceptable. There are other Presbyterians who hold another view, and that is that Presbyterianism is in accord with the principles of the Word of

God, but that view is more pragmatic. Andrew Melville's view is that this is the way it is to be done and it cannot be done any other way.

I have been asked, "What is Erastianism and why was the Second Reformation opposed to Erastianism?" Erastus was a Dutch thinker and theologian who taught that the state has ultimate control over the church, at least in matters of church discipline. Excommunication would always be a state action and not a church action. Generally, the term Erastianism is used for any system in which the king (or whatever form of government it is) dominates the church. So, Catholicism is no longer being practiced in Scotland. The problem is that the Protestant king wanted to control the church. That is Erastianism. The Scottish Presbyterians and the English Puritans (their first cousins) both opposed that very much. Episcopalians in both countries favored it. After all, the king or queen was the defender of the Episcopal Church. By the way, after the Act of Toleration in 1689, that issue was settled by dividing the two. For a long time, England had wanted Scotland to be Episcopalian, and Scotland had wanted England to be Presbyterian. The solution (wisely adopted by William and Mary) was that Scotland would never make England Presbyterian, and England would certainly never make Scotland Episcopalian. Rather than having one national religion for the two kingdoms, the national religion in Scotland would be Presbyterian. In England, the other part of the land, the national religion would be Episcopalian or Anglican. Technically, when the king or queen crosses between and passes over the line into Scotland, he or she becomes a Presbyterian and worships in the kirk. Then, when they go back south, they become an Episcopalian again. So, the king or queen can change churches by traveling.