THE SCOTTISH COVENANTERS

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Reprinted from *The Evangelical Quarterly*

Published by

JAMES CLARKE & CO. LTD.

9 Essex Street, London, W.C.2

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I

It may be said, with a great deal of truth, that for the majority of people to-day the words "Covenant" and "Covenanters" have no significance, or, at any rate, the least possible. They have not, in fact, had much for the present generation; and by those who, writing about Scotland, being neither of native blood nor native faith, have not the atmosphere or knowledge which should justify their opinions on such matters, they are often spoken of as being among the bores of history, scarecrows in the fields of Scottish story, clad in the cast-off garments of forgotten squabbles. To such, the lonely graves in our moorlands, and the grey stones in the grassy kirkyards of the glens speak as if in a lost language; and they are inclined to laugh at the story which it tells, because they do not understand. Yet there was a day when our own folk were taught, in school and pulpit, what was the rock to which Scotland was moored, whereby she rode through the heavy storms that assailed her, when the bitter blasts of hate and hell and death split her sails, broke her masts, and shook her over the verge of mortal dread, near doom, yet could not tear her from her anchorage.

The multiplicit elements of change in mental, moral, social and religious life during the past fifty years have largely silted up the well of memory. There has been, in this, a spiritual and historical impoverishment, and a very definite loss of the sense of the presence of God in our daily life, when so much that is vital in our history is consigned to the dusty oblivion of the lumber-rooms of the soul.

The result, in regard to the Covenanters, is that if they are thought of at all they are considered to have been, for the greater part, a rebellious set of narrow-minded bigots, the fag-end of the Scottish nation—impelled into difficult and frequently tragic situations by gusty prejudices, and lost to all sense of justice through unreasonable and unreasoning bias. A motley crowd of cobblers, weavers, labourers and such like, who objected to instrumental music and the dignity of ordered service, they were led and misled by a handful of fanatical preachers, ranting the insane enthusiasms of a mentality unbalanced by apocalyptic

delusions. Their spiritual arrogance made them intolerant and intolerable ; and there had to be dealt out to them such a measure of that retribution by which sovereignty, with the refinements and culture of a country, must defend itself, as secured the saving and passing on of the self-respect of the nation. That makes a good well-rounded picture of a period of crisis in Scotland, very satisfactory for those whose predilections and shut-eyed consideration of fuss, in a busy age like ours, makes them seek for summaries that conform with those prejudices of theirs which they call taste.

It is right, therefore, that there should be some consideration given to the sources and impulses and provocations that became charged with inevitableness, holding up all sorts and conditions of men and women in Scotland to encounter and endure, without grumbling, outcasting, hunger, nakedness, and anguish, and to look death in the face without faltering or fear, giving before their fellows and high heaven their testimony to the victory-secret of the Crown-rights of Jesus Christ. We who enjoy in ease what cost pain and martyrdom to secure, in days before our day, are apt to think neither of the struggle, nor of the worth of what inspired it or what it won, and too little of the stubborn inflexibleness of character which made its purchase sure, through refusal to be patient of oppression, and polite to the devil when he was let loose in Scotland.

The idea of a Covenant was a plain thing of common sense. It was natural that, in great movements, involving the risk not only of peril but also of treachery, it should be necessary to have in plain words a statement of the purpose of the combination and the justification of it : and that all who were ready to stake their lives and possessions for its sake should sign their names to it, as before God. The writing of one's name on a solemn pledge was not far remote from inscribing it on one's conscience ; though there were periods, perhaps, when some who had done this were apt to slip on the edge of their honour if tempted by political or material advantage.

There is not, in life, such a thing as spontaneous combustion. Every conflagration in a human soul has had a slow kindling somewhere. So, the life-motive of the Covenants in Scotland had a long background. The movement had its roots in the fifteenth century, when came the stirring of the sense of personality ; the renascence of a man's soul ; the sudden or slowly

gradual acquaintance of a man with himself; the feeling of his right to a place in the thought of God; and, in a special degree, the opening of a wide perspective in which to learn the significance of thought and judgment. Men were moved to seek for themselves direct knowledge of the Scriptures, and the truths of the Christian religion; and that gave an impetus which did not die. It is true that not everybody was fit for all that, but the teaching of the truth, liberated by Holy Writ, opened by the vernacular, was an indomitable influence on the movements that followed. The burnings of the first witnesses only intensified enquiry. The flame of martyrs' fires has always deepened and sanctified the wonder of the Holy page. Scotland rubbed her eyes, clearing them from the smoke, that she might see to write her name on her pledge to God; and the power of it passed, ineradicably, into the nation's heart, and made her witnesses steadfast.

II

The story of the struggles of the Scottish nation for the freedom of her faith is a long one—too long for the limits of an article. Details of it and of the cruel perversions of law which made them inevitable, must be read in any reputable history, and in the State papers. Throughout it all it must be kept in mind that the Reformation in Scotland had been accomplished by presbyters, and that prelacy, being the pet implement of the kings, about whom were strong and justifiable suspicion of papal contacts—to put it mildly—was under the same dread as Rome herself. It was distasteful to the great mass of the Scottish nation, and, through the unparalleled cruelty of its enforcement, it became a thing of horror to them.

The measures by which the Presbyterian clergy were driven from their parishes into the wilds, rather than submit to the Erastian imposition of rites, ceremonies, and forms of church government that were alien to the people of all classes and contrary to established law and usage, along with the record of multiplicit "swing-swang" of statutes, and the march and counter-march of events through hope and despair, defeat and victory, fill a large and very vitally important space in the life-history of our land. That the nation was on the side of the Covenants is clear, for the documents were signed by multitudes all over the country; and when the preachers, in their

hundreds, were outlawed and went into the desert, the people followed them for worship and the sacraments, remaining faithful in the face of oppressions and cruel persecutions. There can be no better test than that.

The general statement as to the social quality, or rather the want of it in the modern sense, of the Covenanters is not supported by facts. The Covenants were signed and supported by peasant, laird, lord and baron, servant-maid and lady.

To assert that they were obstinate is not so true as to say that they were staunch in their convictions. Obstinacy will go a great length, but it will not go all the way through the Valley of the Shadow for argument's sake.

The people of the Covenant believed, to the very root of their being, that what they did believe was sacredly vital as their very souls: and they were ready to die, and did die in their thousands, rather than surrender to what they believed to be wrong. That belongs to a far nobler field than obstinacy or contumacy. To-day, unfortunately for the settlement of the world, we live in a time when Compromise is lord: but in the field of vital principles compromise is surrender and betrayal. The deepest things of faith are looked upon as controversial, and therefore not for polite society. To be true to the beatitudes is to become wearisome. Yet indifference, mistaken for broad-mindedness, may be satisfactory to Gallio, but never to the man who values truth and believes that he is responsible to God for the conservation of it. The Covenanter's faith could neither surrender nor equivocate. Conscience lifted his resistance to the level of a stately majesty which could rebuke his oppressors.

Perhaps it is most frequently said that the Covenanters were intolerant of the religion of others. But it is at least arresting when the slayer complains of the intolerance and impatience of the slain. There is a good Scots proverb that some people are always topmost, and are always crying "Murder!" To hear Dalzell, Middleton, Sharp, Claverhouse or Bluidy Mackenzie cooing for toleration and pleading for it with thumb-screws and the boots, would make either angels or devils laugh—I am not sure which! Were these implements of torture, the scaffold, the dungeons of the Bass, the filthy cavern of Dunottar, the stake of drowning in the Solway waters, the agony, exile, death and ruin of some 18,000 people, the marks of tolerance, broad-mindedness and genial tenderness of heart towards

differences of opinion? If so, may God preserve us from the brotherly love of those who used them in a friendly argument!

As for their ignorance, what they left remains as the product of minds which sought divine truth in the higher paths of knowledge, guided by the lamp of revelation, at its fullest, in Holy Writ. They were, in their literature and theology, Bible-Christians: and I am not aware of any other kind of real Christian, by divine right.

One does not quite know under what category falls the charge we sometimes hear—of quite recent origin—that the Church in Scotland in the seventeenth century neglected art. We can only wonder at the amount of knowledge or ignorance that can actually make such a statement. For the Church was very busy studying and exercising the higher art of living and dying for her faith; and she had no leisure for painters and decorators. It is always worth while to read a little of the history of a period before writing about it.

We hear also a great deal about the cruelty of the Covenanters to Montrose. But that had really behind it jealousies of clan and politics, from which Montrose himself was not free. We could not expect him to be. A hero, even, does not cut himself adrift from his humanity.

One must always remember that Montrose himself chose the arbitrament of war, with its risks and issues.

It is always said that his only fault was his loyalty to the king. Even if it were, it was loyalty to a king who was in the wrong, who, mal-educated by his father, could not believe or understand that anybody might or could dare to differ from him. Montrose's motto, "The king at any cost" meant simply "the king right or wrong". And he fought, first, for a stubborn fool; and, last, for a two-faced Autolycus who cared not what price his victim paid for his devotion, but was ready, when he remembered, in security, to arrange a fine funeral for the weather-bleached fragments of the brave man's limbs gathered from the spikes of shame, where they had been beaten by the wind and rain. Such a policy was sure to end, if successful, in absolutism, dictatorship, misery of red anarchy and violence.

The scheme of the Covenanters was safer, though they did not plan for self. They believed in a monarchy sanctioned by Christian sanity—not egocentric nor mega-cephalic,—with

conviction not that it is all the world but that it shares, royally, citizenship in the realm. That policy led to sane parliamentary constitutional government, the palladium of national liberty.

It is also to be remembered that Montrose had the open aid of papist allies; and he had the backing of Romanists in other ways. It was not therefore wonderful that he was not looked upon with favour, and that his desertion from the Covenanters was a strong ground of deep mistrust and suspicion. He was a man to whom his king behaved treacherously, and whom a friend betrayed. So he tasted the deepest bitterness the soul can know, in his defeat and doom.

Scotland, in her Church, suffered oppression from 1662 to 1688; but the period from 1684 was specially designated "The Killing Time", a name which amply and aptly commemorates her agony, probably unparalleled in history, on behalf of a faith which, for the purposes of tyranny and avarice, had been declared treason. We cultivate a false magnanimity and monocled superiority by snarling or chuckling at the fools and churls who had no more sense than to give their bodies to the gallows and the rack for Christ's sake in Scotland! But memory that has only ingratitude for its creed has no immortality. Truth comes back again some day on the tide, along the shore.

III

The crucial error of the kings, provocative of oppositions, lay in their attempt to impose their own personal predilections on the people; and, from the point of view of their English geographical position, ignoring Scotland, as a nation in possession of her own entity, free, with a parliament, law courts, church, and constitutional rights.

The obsession of absolutism became as possessive as personal identity: and, in its full exercise, as pagan as the idea of the divinity of a Roman emperor—and as fatal as a plague.

If the man on the throne be God-sent, he must do the will of Him that sent him: and no honest man can say that the Stuart dynasty were proofs of their claim. Their written acts and proclamations, their attitude towards their pledges and promises, the general suspicion that hung above their practice and their creed, made them a peril to any thinking community,

conscious of having reason and a conscience. Every patient soul had at length to vindicate its right to live.

The only absolute authority recognized by Protestantism was the authority of the Word of God, in Holy Writ. In Scotland, by national agreement, the Pope was displaced by the Church, wide-awakened as by a new revelation, democratic in government, simple in worship, based on the New Testament—the Kingdom of God in life and practice free.

The post-Reformation Stuarts made themselves not only popes but gods : and the curse of Herod fell upon them. What the Covenanters felt was that the only divine right was righteousness and the exercise of it. It is where God is, and it guides everyone who truly seeks Him. He who bears in his body the marks of Christ knows that he has it. Not to man, but to God, the only Absolute, is he answerable for the conviction of his soul. That opened the starry avenues wide for the man in the Bass, or in the chamber of torture and dismay, or climbing the ladder of the gallows before the crowd that came to see him die for Christ.

James VI played with both Protestants and Catholics, changing his coat for each without changing his mind for either, and false to both, because he thought he never could be wrong. To the Scottish Presbyterians he was doubly false, because he knew that they saw through him—a thing that a man like him never can forgive.

His son, Charles I, obstinate, self-willed, and as self-centred as his father, with little knowledge of human nature, foolishly led astray by flattering time-servers, roused Scotland and provoked the National Covenant, which justified its title, in protest against the attempt to thrust Anglicanism upon the Scottish Church. He went forward, learning nothing, following the *ignis fatuus* of the Infallible and Omnipotent Sovereign Ego, till he found himself walking in blood to anarchy and death.

Charles II went even further, for he seldom thought of keeping his word to man or woman. His first Scottish Parliament, suitably called "The Drunken Parliament", swept everything that had been law between 1638 and 1650 into one heap, and labelled it "Treason". It reiterated the dogma of royal supremacy in all causes, framed an Oath of Allegiance upon it, and resumed persecutions. Charles was, of course, a libertine, but he was also a traitor to his country. In May 1670, at Dover,

while ostensibly undertaking to help Louis XIV in war with Holland and the Dutch Netherlands, he handed himself secretly over for a subsidy of £200,000 a year from France, to aid Louis in his schemes for the overthrow of Protestantism, and was also to receive 6,000 French troops in order to crush any rebellion in England which might arise when, as a convert himself, he began to restore Catholicism there. This last clause was kept secret, and a copy of the treaty, without it, handed to his ministers. For the last ten years of his reign he was actually in receipt of a pension from France, a bad investment, for it was for the lease of his conscience, and he had none. He could not by nature bear the honest faith of the Covenanter.

James VII was strong only in cruelty, and neither in honour nor humanity worthy of consideration as a man, still less as a king, subordinating everything to his great obsession of overthrowing Protestantism—the only thing in which he was honest.

These men on the throne had no fundamental knowledge of the real meaning of their office. They broke most solemn pledges. They ignored the courts of the realm. They made themselves a curse to Scotland by their cruelty and perfidy. They instituted, as a supplement to the torture theatre, a system of oppression whereby bloody murder, rapine, and every form of brutality was let loose upon the people, at the sword-point of a dissolute soldiery, with a subtle method of extortion of fines for not attending the ministrations of the curates, for clinging to their own clergy, for sheltering or giving food or drink, or even speaking to their own folk, outcast for their faith. Even to have, at family prayers, five people besides the family, was constituted a crime. But the acme of all was reached when in April 1685 any person who preached at a conventicle, either in a house or in the fields, or any who was present at a conventicle as a hearer, in the fields, was to be punished with death and confiscation of goods. There was, in general, no trouble about a trial. A shot by the roadside, or on the moor, or anywhere, settled the matter. There can be no defence of that. God and man are bound to get busy against it.

The fines and estates, forfeited on the most flimsy excuse, went to Claverhouse and the rest. No wonder they were busy, and enjoyed their work.

It is somewhat of a fashion to say with a snigger that the Reformation owed its initiation and success to the greed of the

barons after the property of the Church. But nobody thinks of saying that the royalists in the seventeenth century achieved this trampling oppression of Scotland for lust of greed of gain rather than from loyalty to a high ideal and a sacred cause. Yet it would be truer, and the later movement had within it the element of uniquely sinister callousness and cruel murder.

Even loyalty, rooted in religion, had to see at last the untrustworthiness and cruelty of the dynasty, and to open the door through which it staggered forth to the destiny it had played and paid for. It was not the Covenanters who drove them out. They builded themselves out with treacheries and cruelties, and they had no standing-ground left even in the respect of their best subjects.

James VI was quite fit to initiate torture, but James VII loved it. So the Covenanter had not only to bear the anguish of suffering under the mallet that drove the wedges in the Boot home until the marrow gushed, apart from or in conjunction with the new and effective machine called the thumbekins, as the Order in Council describes it, but they had also to endure the added insult of the presence of the bigot James and, in his time, the apostate Sharp, gloating over their sufferings.

The end of Sharp, and others like him, carries with it neither astonishment nor sorrow. He bought his doom with the last penny of its price. It was impossible—indeed it would have been almost unfair to himself—that he should escape it. He had chosen the part of Judas, and he got his pieces of silver paid fully into his hand. His own letter of May 21st, 1661, to Middleton, proves that. He was largely responsible for the hell of agony through which Scotland was dragged in his day, and after his removal. The torture of the poor brave creatures who were his countrymen and whose faith had been his till he found a profitable market for his betrayal of it, was largely his devising. A renegade always hates the cradle he was rocked in.

In Mitchell's case the Records of the Council prove that in his keenness to send the poor torture-broken wretch to death, he and the other members of the Court perjured themselves on oath, a terrible thing for an established Court of the realm.

The wonder is that he was allowed to live so long, for he drove Scotland mad by oppression and murder. The pity is that the act of judgment and justice, falling, by its method, into the category of murder, gave the persecutors a plea for multiplying

and intensifying the agonies of the people. At the same time it added the interest of tragedy, and an atmosphere of pseudo-martyrdom to one whose name, otherwise, could have had nothing to redeem it from the obloquy which was its right. We must remember, for the Covenanters, that the act arose from no long cool preparation, but through the suggestion of a moment's chance, like fate emergent.

The accentuated tragedy was that there could in Scotland be no redress except by the resolute appeal to arms; and the Covenanter, with a pitifully pathetic loyalty, clung, even in his sufferings, to kingship, till he could cling no longer, when his grip slipped in blood of royal perfidy.

At the Revolution the Scottish Convention spoke out straightforwardly. They resolved that "James the Seventh, being a professed Papist, did assume the royal power, and acted as king, without ever taking the oath required by law . . . whereby he forfaulted the right to the crown, and the throne became vacant." They also closed the succession henceforward against Papists, abolished episcopacy in Scotland, and bestowed the Crown on William and Mary.

In regard to the Church, there might have been some hesitation at the Revolution, but no authority would have dared to propose that the ecclesiastical system which had stained itself so deeply in the blood of the people should be established in Scotland. It had been the weapon of absolutism, and was identified by the Scottish folk with the bloodiest persecution and oppression known, probably since the days of Nero.

We owe to the true and brave, whose devotion to Christ made them fear neither king nor bishop, agony nor death, a gratitude inexpressible. They were in the true apostolic succession from the Reformation. Their endurance brought not only the free constitution under which we live to-day, but even almost in our own time gave some of our people the strength for sacrifice for conscience' sake, more than once. Would that we had among us still, more of the stuff that made them what they were!

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