

The Beginnings: Patrick Hamilton and George Wishart

THE SCOTTISH REFORMATION became official when the Scottish Parliament ratified the *Scots Confession* on the 17th of August 1560. The seed had been sown, however, many years earlier, and the honour of being the first Scottish Reformed theologian goes to Patrick Hamilton, described by John Knox as the one ‘at whom our history doth begin’.¹

Hamilton, born around 1504, at either Stonehouse in Lanarkshire or Kincavel near Linlithgow, had strong aristocratic connections, his father being the half-brother of the Earl of Arran and his mother a granddaughter of James II. It was due to such connections that he was appointed titular Abbot of Fearn in Easter Ross, but the position was non-residential and he probably never saw Fearn in his life. However, the position gave him financial independence, and this enabled him to study at Paris and Louvain, graduating from the former in 1520. Described by Knox as a young man who hated the world ‘and the vanity thereof’,² it was during his time at these centres of learning that Hamilton first encountered the doctrines of Luther, and on his return home he made no secret of his new opinions. He quickly fell under suspicion of heresy, and in 1527 he deemed it prudent to move to the continent, where he was attracted by the growing fame of the German universities, particularly those of Wittenberg and Marburg. Knox and Calderwood describe him as familiar with the Wittenberg luminaries,

1. *John Knox’s History of the Reformation*, ed. William Croft Dickinson, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1949), Vol. 1, p. 11. Hereafter cited as *Knox’s History*.

2. *Knox’s History*, Vol. 1, p. 12.

Luther and Melancthon, but whether he actually spent time in the city itself is doubtful. He did, however, spend time at the new University of Marburg, where he came under the influence of Francis Lambert (1486–1530), a French-born Reformer who was head of the University's theological faculty. It was probably Lambert who encouraged him to write what came to be known as *Patrick's Places*.

But like Bonhoeffer in exile in London four hundred years later, Hamilton was burdened for his own native country and by 1528 he was back home; and not only home, but busily promulgating the 'new doctrines' both publicly and privately. Prevailed upon by Cardinal Beaton to visit St Andrews, he was misled into believing that the Cardinal and his circle shared some of his zeal for reform, but instead he was suddenly arrested, quickly tried and condemned to be burnt at the stake. The sentence was executed at the entrance to St Salvator's College, St Andrews, on 29th February 1528 (the site is still marked by the letters 'PH' on the pavement). The fire was slow, and Hamilton suffered a long, lingering death.

Patrick's Places, the bearer of Hamilton's theological legacy, probably originated as a series of theses which he had defended at the University of Marburg 'no less learnedlie than ferventlie'.³ Originally in Latin, an English translation was published in London in 1532 under the title, *Dyvers Frutful Gatheringes of Scripture concerning Fayth and Workes*.⁴ The translator, John Frith, a gifted scholar and close friend of William Tyndale, was himself burnt at the stake at Smithfield on 4th July 1531. All three had links to the University of Marburg.⁵

As has often been remarked, the *Places* have a strongly Lutheran flavour. This appears, for example, in Hamilton's view of the law. Without grace, it is beyond our power to fulfil it; its real function is merely to show us our sin. It follows from this that no manner of works can make us righteous (227), but what is particularly striking here is the way that Hamilton links the impossibility of salvation by works to the necessity of the death of Christ: 'since Christ, the maker of heaven and earth, and all that therein is, behoved

3. David Calderwood, *The History of the Kirk of Scotland*, 8 vols., ed. Thomas Thomson (Edinburgh: Wodrow Society, 1842-49), Vol. 1, p. 74.

4. This translation is printed as Appendix I in Volume 2 of *Knox's History*, pp. 219-29. Further page references to this translation appear in brackets in the text.

5. See David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 217-19.

to die for us, we are compelled to grant, that we were so far drowned in sin that neither our deeds, nor all the treasures that ever God made, or might make, might have helped us out of it; Ergo, no deeds nor works may make us righteous' (227). He repeats the point a little later: 'to what end should He have died for thee, if any works of thine might have saved thee?' (228).

The alternative to salvation by works is then stated in classic Lutheran terms: 'Faith only [alone] makes a man good and righteous; faith only makes a man a member of Christ, an inheritor of heaven, and a servant of God' (228). 'Faith only' saves.

When it comes to the nature of this faith, the *Places* define it as 'a sureness' (224: an interesting etymology for 'assurance?'). Faith is sure, but of what? In the first instance, it is sure of the Word of God but, more specifically, it is sure of the Gospel contained within that Word; and when it comes to defining that Gospel Hamilton maintains a splendid Christological focus. Faith is sure that Christ is not only the Saviour of the world, but that He is our Saviour; He died for our sins; He offered Himself for us; He bought us with His blood; Christ, and all that is His, is ours.

Behind all this lies an articulate doctrine of the atonement, including clear echoes of Luther's so-called 'classic' emphasis on the cross as a victory over the devil: Christ has delivered us from the law, from the devil and from hell (222). But, as in Luther, we also hear the language of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*?⁶ Christ made satisfaction for our sins (222) and thus pacified the Father of Heaven. 'What,' he asks is this, 'to say that Christ died for our sins?' and he replies in terms which might have come straight from Wittenberg: 'It is that thou shouldest have died perpetually, and that Christ, to deliver thee from death, died for thee, and changed thy perpetual death in His own death. For thou made the fault, and He suffered the pain. ... Now since He hath paid thy debt, thou diest not: no, thou canst not, but shouldest have been damned, if His death were not. But since He was punished for thee, thou shalt not be punished' (228).⁷

It is on this foundation, Christ's work of atonement, that the doctrine of justification rests. At the same time, however, Hamilton insists

6. See *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 260-356.

7. Hamilton was martyred seven years before Luther delivered his famous 1535 *Lectures on Galatians*, but there is a striking similarity between his language here and that of Luther's exposition of Galatians 3:13.

that faith is not in our power; it is the gift of God. This ties in with Calderwood's statement (quoting from Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*) that one of the charges brought against Hamilton was that he taught that 'none are saved but they are before predestinated'.⁸ But he also emphasises, though in different terminology, the point later made by Calvin, that while it is faith alone that justifies, the faith which justifies is not alone.⁹ It is always accompanied by both hope and charity. He insists, however, that the correct order is not that a man is good because he does good works, but that he does good works because he is a good man. At the same time he warns against seeking to earn the inheritance of heaven or remission of sins by performing our own good works: 'Press not, then, to the inheritance of heaven through presumption of thy good works; for if thou do, thou accountest thyself holy and equal unto Him, because thou wilt take nothing of Him for naught.'

Nothing in the following centuries of Reformed theological reflection would surpass the evangelical clarity of these words.

Various eminences, from John Major to the Faculty of the University of Louvain, congratulated Beaton on the decisive action he had taken to nip Scottish Lutheranism in the bud. Its effect, however, was quite the opposite. People began to ask why Master Patrick had been burnt; and when they were told of the heretical doctrines he was accused of, they began to ask whether these were not the very doctrines they were required to believe on pain of damnation. Among the clergy themselves there were several whose faith in the church had already been disturbed, and many of St Andrews' brightest students began, in the words of Calderwood, 'to spye the vanitie of the receaved suprstitioun.'¹⁰ The authorities (in effect Archbishop Beaton) then began to wonder whether further burnings were called for, and it was this that prompted John Lindsay, a close acquaintance of Beaton's, to offer the oft-quoted advice: 'My Lord, if yee burne any moe, except yee folow my counsel, yee will utterly destroy your selves. If yee will burne them, let them be burnt in hollow sellers [cellars], for the smoke of Mr Patrik Hammiltoun hath infected as many as it blew upon.'¹¹

8. Calderwood, *History*, Vol. 1, p. 75.

9. Calvin, *Tracts ad Letters*, Vol. 3, p. 152.

10. Calderwood, *History*, Vol. 1, p. 83.

11. *ibid.*, p. 86.

But the advice went unheeded, and as Protestant teaching gradually spread, so did the persecution, driven not so much by the Archbishop as by his nephew, David, who, as Cardinal Beaton, succeeded him as Primate in 1539. From the martyrdom of Henry Forrest in 1533 to that of the aged Walter Milne in 1558, Hamilton ‘was followed to the stake or the scaffold by twenty or thereby of his countrymen’.¹² Many more were imprisoned or forced to seek refuge in exile. This was no act of cowardice. It was a course of action which Christians had recognised from the very beginning as mandated by Christ Himself: ‘When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next’ (Matt. 10:23 ESV). In the course of the Reformation it was followed by the hundreds of refugees who poured into Geneva in Calvin’s time; by the English Protestants who found refuge in Frankfurt from the fanatical ferocity of Mary Tudor; by the Anabaptist and Puritans who fled for sanctuary to the New World; by the Huguenots who escaped to England following the massacre of St Bartholomew’s Day; and by the hundreds of Scots forced into exile on the continent in the 1530s.

George Wishart

Among these was George Wishart. Described by Knox as ‘a man of such graces as before him were never heard within this realm’,¹³ Wishart was born around 1512 and, like Hamilton, was well connected, being either the son or the nephew of Sir James Wishart, Laird of Pittarrow in Kincardineshire. He studied at the University of Aberdeen where, unusually for the time, he acquired a knowledge of Greek, and it was his reading the Greek New Testament with some students that first brought him under the suspicion of David Beaton in 1534. When summoned by the Bishop of Brechin to explain himself, prudence drove him to seek refuge in England. Initially he found shelter in Bristol, then part of the diocese of Bishop Hugh Latimer (they would ultimately share the same fate: Latimer was burnt at the stake outside Balliol College, Oxford, in October 1555). But conditions in England changed when Henry VIII passed the Six Articles Act in 1539. Dubbed by Protestants ‘the bloody whip with six strings’ these Articles enforced Catholicism in all its details, including Transubstantiation and Clerical

12. Hay Fleming, *The Reformation in Scotland* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910), p. 194.

13. *Knox’s History*, Vol. 1, p. 60.

Celibacy. The one thing Henry did not enforce was the supremacy of the Pope. From henceforth supremacy was to lie in his own hands; and the fear of the King was already such that in response to the enforcement of Clerical Celibacy Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, put away his wife.

Wishart now had to seek asylum among the Reformed churches of Zurich, Basle and Strasbourg, but in 1542 (while Henry VIII was still living) he returned to England, taking up residence this time in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. However, his stay here was brief. In 1543 he returned to Scotland and quickly began an itinerant ministry in the areas around Montrose and Dundee; and so effective was his ministry in the latter city that, according to A. F. Mitchell, it came to be known as 'the Scottish Geneva'.¹⁴

Forced to leave Dundee by order of the magistrates, Wishart moved west to Ayrshire, but shortly afterwards Dundee was ravaged by the plague, and Wishart returned to the city to offer the comfort not only of his preaching but of his personal care for the diseased and the dying. Once the plague had abated, he moved to the Lothians and it was there, in the village of Ormiston, that he was seized by the Earl of Bothwell, Sheriff Principal of the county. Bothwell gave his solemn pledge that he would not abandon him to the will of Beaton and his associates, but under the blandishments of the Cardinal and the Queen (Mary of Guise, the mother of Mary, Queen of Scots) this resolution evaporated, and Bothwell delivered him into custody at Edinburgh Castle. Toward the end of January 1546, Wishart was taken to St Andrews, tried by a convocation of bishops and other senior ecclesiastics, condemned on a charge of heresy, and burnt at the stake outside the castle walls of St Andrews on 1st March, 1546. Fully aware of Wishart's public standing, and fearing that an attempt might be made to rescue him, the Cardinal (who, it was said, watched the execution from a castle window) 'commanded to bend all the ordinance of the castle right against that part; and commanded all the gunners to be readie, and stand beside their gunnes, unto such time as he was burnt.'¹⁵

Some idea of Wishart's theology can be gathered from the charges brought against him at his trial.¹⁶ Inevitably, however, these reflect only

14. Alexander F. Mitchell, *The Scottish Reformation: Its Epochs, Episodes, Leaders and Distinctive Characteristics* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1900), p. 62.

15. Calderwood, *History*, Vol. 1, p. 216.

16. The articles on which he stood accused (eighteen in total) are listed, along with Wishart's answers, in Calderwood, *History*, Vol. 1, pp. 206-16.

the polemical side of his message, and sometimes he firmly denies ever using such words as his accuser puts in his mouth. When, for example, it was alleged that he had said that ‘the preest standing at the altar saying masse, was like a foxe wagging his taile in July’, Wishart calmly responds, ‘My lords, I said not so.’ He admitted, however, having said that outward bodily worship without the inward moving of the heart was ‘nocht elles but the playing of an ape’; and he regaled his accusers with the story of an encounter he had once had with a Jew who had adduced as one of his main arguments for rejecting Christianity the fact that the church adored and worshipped as its God ‘a piece of bread, baken upon the ashes.’ It is clear from the ensuing exchanges that Wishart repudiated the practices of auricular confession, extreme unction, and prayer to the saints; and clear, too, that he disavowed the doctrines of purgatory and clerical celibacy.

But his basic positive convictions also emerge such as, for example, his commitment to the doctrine of *sola scriptura*: ‘Except it be the Word of God, I darre affirme nothing.’ Equally clearly, he spoke of the priesthood of all believers. ‘Everie lay man is a preest,’ he declared, and went on to insist that what Scripture enjoined was not confession to a priest, but ‘the secreit acknowledging of our sinnes before God.’ To the charge that he preached that man has no free will, he gave a measured reply, appealing to John 8:36, ‘If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed’ (NKJV). ‘As many as firmly believe in Christ,’ he added, ‘to them is given liberty, but as many as believe not, they are bound servants of sinne.’

These were clearly staple elements in Wishart’s preaching, but by no means the whole of it. He not only proclaimed the rudiments of Christian faith and practice as summarised in the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments, but during his time in Dundee he also gave a systematic exposition of the Epistle to the Romans (this might have owed something to the fact that Calvin’s Commentary on Romans, published in 1540, was hot off the presses). But the best indication of Wishart’s theological position is that he translated into English the *Confession of Faith* of the Churches of Switzerland, originally composed in Latin in 1536. This *Confession*, generally referred to as the First Helvetic Confession to distinguish it from the widely influential Second Helvetic Confession of 1566,¹⁷ was the result of a conference

17. The Second Helvetic *Confession* was approved by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1566 and reaffirmed in 1638.

held in Basle in January 1536 with the aim of promoting a more extensive unity between the churches of the Swiss cantons. Each of these churches already had its own confession, but these had only a local authority, and the conference decided to commission a short General Confession, setting forth all the major points of the Christian faith. The task was remitted to a small committee which included, among others, Henry Bullinger, successor to Ulrich Zwingli at Zurich. The Confession was completed in February 1536 and a month later it was received unanimously by representatives of the various Swiss churches.

Wishart's translation was printed posthumously in London around 1548, two years after his martyrdom. It is the only extant document from his pen,¹⁸ and from the fact that he went to the trouble of translating the *Confession* we may safely conclude that he was happy to endorse it. This endorsement extends, we may be sure, to the *Confession's* emphasis on its continuity with the theology of the fathers of the early church. In so far as they were careful interpreters of Scripture, 'we honour and worshyp them as chosen and beloved instruments of God.' In accordance with this, the *Confession* sets forth its doctrine of God in language that clearly, though not slavishly, follows that of the Nicene Creed, affirming that God 'is almyghtie, being one in substance and three in persones'; but unlike the Nicene Creed (even in its extended 381 form) it offers a comprehensive statement on the work of the Holy Spirit in creation: just as God has created all things out of nothing by His Son, 'so by his Spirite and prouydence [providence] governs he, preserues and nourysheth he, most truly, ryghtously, and wysley all thynges.' The Christology similarly follows the paths of the ancient ecumenical creeds, though with a special emphasis on our union with Christ. God's merciful care appears through Christ, 'the very Sone of God, and very God and very man also'. This Christ 'was made our brother', taking upon Him 'whole man, made of soul and body, havynge [having] two natures unpermyxte [unmixed] and one deuyne [divine] person, to the intent that he should restore unto lyfe us that were deed, and make us arise of God anexte with hym selfe.' The flesh of Christ, we are told, was like our own in all things except sinfulness, but this exception was no minor

18. The text of Wishart's translation is available in David Laing (ed.), *The Miscellany of the Wodrow Society*, Volume First (Edinburgh: The Wodrow Society, 1844), pp. 1-23. The text of the Confession itself is available in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, Vol. III: The Creeds of the Evangelical Protestant Churches* (New York: Harper, 1882), pp. 211-31.