

CHURCH HISTORY: SECOND SESSION (SENIOR CLASS)

LECTURE 1: ANDREW MELVILLE (1545-1622)

Born near Montrose in 1545, Melville was destined to bring the great work of Reformation begun by Knox to greater completion through the establishment of Presbyterianism as the distinctive form of church polity in Scotland. For this he was eminently qualified by the Great Head of the Church. A man of indomitable courage and zeal for the glory of God and the spiritual welfare of his fellow countrymen, he possessed both outstanding organising ability and the highest educational attainments of his day. His father was whole-heartedly in sympathy with the pre-Reformation movement for reform. An elder brother studied under Melancthon while Melville himself heard John Knox preaching about the year 1556 (prior to the establishment of the Reformation in 1560). A precocious and exceptionally talented and diligent student, acquainted with the gospel and its saving power in his own experience, Melville went up to St. Andrews' University in 1559 — knowing more of the Greek language than his professors!

Seeking to further his studies, Melville thereafter resided for 10 years in Europe where he added to his stores of learning, studying Hebrew in France and theology in Geneva under Beza (with whom he formed a lasting friendship) and where, at the age of 21, he became professor of Latin — soon acquiring European fame as an outstanding scholar in the literary world.

Melville's character was not unlike that of Knox, — possessing the latter's unbending courage, manly firmness and moral integrity along with the advantages of wider scholarship and literary attainments. When he returned to Scotland in 1574 he was admirably equipped to lead the Scottish Reformed Church in her conflict with royal despotism in its attempts to force prelacy upon her. He boldly asserted and defended the Church's independent jurisdiction under the Headship of Christ from the usurpations of secular, political interference.

Educational Reforms

Melville's sagacity combined with his continental educational experience and knowledge of Jesuit intrigue, led him to see the necessity for a well-educated ministry who could by their learning, knowledge of the original languages of Scripture and exegetical skills, resist and overcome the plausible specious arguments of the agents of the Counter-Reformation movement who were actively

seeking to seduce unstable protestants to return to the Roman fold. With tireless energetic zeal, Melville began a series of necessary reforms in university education; firstly at Glasgow where, in 1574, he was appointed principal of the university while at the same time carrying out his duties as minister of Govan, and secondly at the new college (St. Mary's) of St. Andrews, in each case revising the curriculum and raising the standard of Scottish higher education — his primary concern being the necessity for not only a godly but also an educated ministry. Combining the dual role of both a minister and a professor of divinity allowed him the right of sitting in church courts where he showed outstanding debating skills in arguing his case for both educational and church reform.

Melville's aims were: (1) to improve the scope and standard of Scottish education; (2) to make it unnecessary for students to go to Europe to further their education and where they were in danger from proselytising Jesuits operating in European seats of learning and who had already won over a number of Scots students; and (3) to enable theological students by their facility in the original languages and biblical knowledge to overcome the arguments of their Romish adversaries. As a result of his university reforms there was an upsurge in student numbers and during his tenure as principal of St. Andrews such was its fame that it attracted students from the continent — reversing the previous trend! Melville's influence upon the minds of a younger generation of ministers was profound — men who in their generation were being prepared to contend for the same principles as Melville and whose long struggles for the liberties of the church were to be crowned with eventual success at the renewing of the National Covenant and the 1638 reforming General Assembly at Glasgow.

Church Reform: Assertion of Presbyterian Principles in opposition to Prelacy

Melville's fame rests not only on his far-sighted educational reforms but, more significantly, his advocacy of church reform in government and discipline as the champion of presbyterianism as opposed to prelacy. King James favoured episcopacy with its lordly bishops as being in agreement with his own ideas of spiritual despotism over the affairs of the church as well as those of the state — the bishops being useful tools in securing the enforced compliance of the Scottish Church and her people to his royal will. Bishops were beholden to the king for their exalted office and manifested their gratitude to him by flattery and fawning servility. But Melville and others likeminded were not afraid to preach faithfully against wrong-doing and sinful practices by all classes in society — not excepting the king

and his royal household! Hence James' intense dislike of presbyterianism which he said, "agrees as well with monarchy as God and the devil"!

Against this royal despotism with its invasive erastianism and the encroachments of an avaricious nobility Melville fearlessly contended. In a letter to Beza he highlights the difficulties he encountered:

"For five years we have maintained a warfare against pseudo-episcopacy and have not ceased to urge the adoption of a strict discipline. We have presented to his Majesty and the three estates of the Kingdom (i.e. Scotland) at different times, and recently at the parliament which is now sitting, a form of discipline to be enacted and confirmed by public authority.....almost all the nobility are averse. They complain that if pseudo-episcopacy be abolished the state of the kingdom will be overturned; if presbyteries be established, the royal authority will be diminished; if ecclesiastical goods are restored to their legitimate use, the royal treasury will be exhausted.....They plead that bishops, with abbots and priors, form the third estate in parliament; that all jurisdiction, ecclesiastical as well as civil, pertain solely to the king and his council, and that all the ecclesiastical property should go to the exchequer.....They also insist that the sentence of excommunication shall not be held valid until it has been approved by the king's council. For...while they judge according to the dictates of the carnal mind instead of the revealed will of God, they desire to have everything done by the authority of a single bishop and perpetual overseer of the churches, rather than by the common sentence of presbyters possessing equal authority." (McCrie: Life of Melville. Vol.1,p.202)

At the opening of a General Assembly in 1582, Melville as moderator preached against those who were determined to introduce despotic power into the nation and attempting 'to erect a new popedom' in the person of the king. He then took the lead in presenting a bold remonstrance on the matter to the king and council from the Assembly, and boldly subscribed the paper in face of the regent Arran's threats, followed by his brethren. In 1584 Melville was summoned before the privy council on charges of treason allegedly found in a sermon he preached, but acting on advice from friends, escaped Scottish jurisdiction by retreating to Berwick. In 1596 he accompanied a deputation of ministers to King James at Falkland palace where, taking the king by the sleeve and calling him 'God's sillie vassal', Melville uttered the famous words:

"Therefore sir....I must tell you that there are two kings and two kingdoms in Scotland; there is King James, the head of the commonwealth, and there is Christ Jesus, the King of the Church, whose subject James the Sixth is, and of whose kingdom he is not a king, nor a lord, nor a head, but a member.....you are not the head of the Church; you cannot give us that eternal life which we seek for even in this world, and you cannot

deprive us of it." (McCrie::Life of Melville, Vol. 1, p. 391).

However, following the union of the crowns in 1603 and James' accession to the English throne, Melville was summoned to London in 1607 where he was imprisoned in the Tower for four years. Thereafter he was banished to France where, during his eleven year exile, he taught in the University of Sedan, dying there in 1622.

Melville's Legacy: Second Book of Discipline

Melville's lasting legacy to the Church was the Second Book of Discipline. Composed chiefly by himself with the assistance of others, after long and deliberate discussion it was approved and adopted by the General Assembly under his moderatorship in 1578. A carefully reasoned document, it defines more clearly and exactly than the First Book of Discipline the parameters of Church government. (n.b. The First Book of Discipline was drawn up in the haste of the crisis occasioned by the collapse of the Roman Church organisation and the emergence of the fledgling Reformed Church and the urgent need to provide parliament with the framework of a visible church organisation reformed according to the Word of God).

The Second Book of Discipline emphasises the distinction between the spheres of civil and ecclesiastical power; that the former has for its direct and proper object the promoting of external peace and quiet in the nation, while the latter is concerned with directing men in matters of religion and conscience. Since Christ is the only King and Head of the Church, He has, in His Word, appointed a government in the church distinct from civil government to be exercised in His Name by His own authorised officers and not by civil magistrates or under their direction. Nevertheless, both civil and ecclesiastical governments are of God, and, if rightly used, tend to one end, viz., the glory of God and the welfare of the nation's subjects. Yet they should co-operate within their respective spheres, helping and strengthening one another.

The Second Book of Discipline claims the right of church courts, as courts of Christ, to convene and settle business independent of the civil authorities, such courts being divided into sessions, presbyteries, synods and general assemblies, the church recognising no official higher than the teaching presbyter or minister of the gospel. But none were to be intruded into the ministry contrary to the will of the

congregation. Among abuses the compilers of the Second Book of Discipline wished to see reformed was the abolition of lay patronage which tended to lead to intrusion and was incompatible with a lawful election and the assent of the people over whom the person was to be placed, 'as the practice of the apostolical and primitive kirk and good order craves'.

Conclusion

When we remember that the object of King James by the changes he made through his scheming 'kingcraft' (which he boasted of) in the government of the Scottish Church was to make himself dictator in all matters of religion, and that his ultimate aim was, by means of the bishops, to overturn the civil liberties of the nation and to become absolute master of the consciences, properties and lives of his subjects, only then do we appreciate the debt we owe to Melville. For he was the first to discern the dangerous consequences it posed to the civil and religious liberties of his nation and to denounce and oppose the royal policy regardless of the cost in deprivation of office, imprisonment, and perpetual banishment from his native country. McCrie's concluding remark in his biography of Melville sums up his true worth and rightful place in Scottish Church history:

'Next to her Reformer who, under God, emancipated her from the degrading shackles of papal superstition and tyranny, I know no individual from whom Scotland has received such important services, or to whom she continues to owe so deep a debt of national respect and gratitude, as ANDREW MELVILLE. (vol.2.p.473).

Ronald Mackenzie (November 2005)