ANDREW MELVILLE: LION OF SCOTLAND

Robert W. Anderson

Exactly four hundred years ago, when Andrew Melville caught hold of the sleeve of King James VI of Scotland and called him “God’s sillie vassal” and (according to Melville’s biographer Thomas McCrie) proceeded to address the king in a “strain, perhaps the most singular, in point of freedom, that ever saluted royal ears, or that ever proceeded from the mouth of a loyal subject…,” we have a still shot of both the personality and principles of one of Scotland’s lesser known reformers.

Issues

Andrew Melville (1545-1622) was the successor of the Scots’ most notable reformer, John Knox: their lives overlapped by twenty-seven years. It fell to Melville, in God’s sovereign ordering of things, to preserve, promote, defend, and, in certain particulars, to refine the work of Knox. From our vantage point in history, Andrew Melville’s greatest contribution was his role in Scotland’s struggle for liberty—civil, ecclesiastical and spiritual.

In the civil sphere, the question at issue in Melville’s day was “shall the king govern by his own arbitrary irresponsible will or shall the powers of the throne be limited by the chartered rights of the people?” The common doctrine of his age was that “kings reigned by Divine right and that the understandings and consciences of their subjects were in their keeping.” Melville was to clash with King James VI on this issue, just as Knox, his predecessor, had collided with Mary Queen of Scots some years before. Wylie, in his History of Protestantism says, “Mary held by the principle, to sovereigns a convenient one, of ‘the right divine of kings to govern wrong’.” The civil liberty Knox had labored for was on this principle: “all power is founded on a compact expressed or understood between the rulers and the ruled, and that no one has either divine or human right to govern, save in accordance with the will of the people and the law of God.” It was this same concept of liberty for which Melville later so valiantly contended.

Melville’s philosophy was also at one with Knox respecting ecclesiastical liberty. Both men had to fight against the church’s enslavement from two quarters: from Rome and from the heads of state. Before Knox began his reforming work in Scotland, the nation was in bondage to Rome’s corrupt doctrine, worship, government and morals. Even when Scotland was able to throw off that yoke, the church’s liberty was not to be then and forever safe. Rome sought by various agencies to re-impose the yoke; also Mary Queen of Scots would have subjected the church of Scotland to her own rule in behalf of the Roman church. Whether the pope of Rome or civil ruler, each would have bowed the church to its own laws for the sake of glory, power and wealth. In contrast, Knox maintained “the church was governed solely by her own laws [agreeable to the Scriptures] or administered by her own officers, whose decisions and acts in all things falling within the spiritual and ecclesiastical sphere were final.” According to Wylie, “An independent government in things spiritual, but rigidly restricted to things spiritual, was the root
idea of Knox’s church organization.” When Melville returned home to Scotland two years after the death of Knox, his struggle against the same basic enemies would parallel those of his predecessor.

The labors which Knox and his successor Melville bestowed on behalf of civil and ecclesiastical liberty was rooted in their understanding of spiritual liberty as revealed in the Bible. The Scotland to which Knox preached was generally sunk in sin and superstition. The great burden of Knox, and thereafter of Melville, was that men should have the advantages of the pure gospel. Those two men were the instruments by whom Christ brought “deliverance to the captives and set at liberty them that are bruised.” We refer again to Wylie’s History of Protestantism in which he says, “The Reformation was the cry of the human conscience for pardon...The gospel which showed the way of forgiveness delivered men from bondage and imparting a new life, brought them into a world of liberty.”

As these liberties—civil, ecclesiastical and spiritual—are intimately connected in Scriptures, so they proved to be in the thinking of Knox and Melville. He who has been freed from the dominion of sin and Satan lives to serve God and enjoy his blessings. Being the Lord’s free man, the pardoned sinner is bound to serve his divine Lord according to his will and for His glory. His loyalty to Christ will therefore arm him to oppose and resist any thing which will corrupt or deny the liberty of the church or which will deprive him of his God-given liberties as a citizen of the state. Knox was the first great champion in Scotland of these three aspects of liberty; when he had passed, Melville took up his mantle.

A Life Lived Unto God

Born August 1, 1545, at Baldovy, Scotland, and orphaned at age four, Andrew Melville was raised by an older brother. Because Andrew showed a proficiency for learning, his brother gave him the advantages of education. In his fourteenth year he entered St. Andrews University and, having finished his course, he left the school with the reputation of being “the best philosopher, poet, and Grecian of any young master in the land.”

In 1564 Andrew left Scotland to study in France, studying Hebrew and other oriental languages in Paris and afterward studying law in the University of Poictiers. From France he went to Geneva where he gave himself to further studies in the languages, taught in the Academy and was associated with Theodore Beza, who was the successor of John Calvin.

Two years after the death of Knox (1574), Melville, at the urging of his own countrymen, returned to his homeland where he became principal of the University of Glasgow. There he introduced a new method of education. It was the established practice in all universities at that time for the regent who began a class to continue with it and conduct his students through the whole course of studies for four years. Melville abolished this practice; instead, each regent became a teacher in one or two subjects, thus specializing in their fields of expertise.

Six years later he left the University of Glasgow to become the Principal of the University of St. Andrews at Edinburgh. His fame in both institutions spread and brought
students flocking to them.

Even in his years of study on the continent, Melville had taken an interest in the fortunes of his homeland. So when he was back in Scotland he added to his teaching labors his endeavors for the welfare of the church and nation. From the multitude of his labors, we select a few in which he was involved, which show the heart and mind of the man.

The first major contention in which Melville earned recognition as a leader in the reformation cause was over the tulchan bishops. The year 1560 had seen the Scottish parliament, sympathetic at that point with Knox’s reforms, “rescind the laws in favor of the Romish church and against the Protestant faith.” As of that date, however, the Reformation was not to go unchallenged. The head of the nation changed from one who was favorable to the Reformation, to one who was unfavorable. Dissentions broke out between the Scottish court and the church. A new Regent, Earl of Morton, arranged a meeting between a few ministers and his court. The design and fruit of this meeting was an arrangement whereby benefices (church offices endowed with assets that provided a living) would be occupied by Protestant ministers (often the least worthy of men), only they would have the title of bishop. Under this arrangement, the ministers would have a small part of the revenue attached to the benefices and the vast portion of it would go to the nobility. The ministers who were to occupy this position were called tulchan bishops—the word “tulchan” being the name given a cowhide stuffed with straw which, serving the place of a calf, was placed before the cow to induce them to give their milk. “The bishop,” said one, “had the title, but my lord got the milk or commoditie.” To some, that arrangement might have seemed harmless enough. To Melville and the church as a whole it was not. As Knox had opposed the arrangement as “an invasion of Presbyterian equality” so did Melville, beginning with the church’s General Assembly in 1575.

Melville’s activities with reference to the introduction of the episcopacy via the tulchan bishop arrangement was not simply negative. Constructively, he led in the church’s preparation of a Second Book of Discipline, which was adopted by the General Assembly in 1581 and which would be ratified by the Parliament in 1592. The First Book of Discipline had been rather hastily prepared; more deliberation was given to the preparations of the Second Book. W.M. Hetherington, commenting on the Second Book in his History of the Church of Scotland says, “It begins by stating the essential line of distinction between civil and ecclesiastical power. This it does by declaring that Jesus Christ has appointed a government in his Church, distinct from civil government, which is to be exercised by such office-bearers as He has authorized, and not by civil magistrates, or under their direction.” In the Second Book of Discipline, as again noted by Hetherington, “The name ‘bishop’ is of the same meaning as that of pastor or minister; it is not expressive of superiority or lordship; and the Scriptures do not allow of a pastor of pastors, or a pastor of many flocks.”

In his Life of Andrew Melville, McCrie says with respect to Melville’s part in the preparation of the Second Book of Discipline, “he regarded his exertions in this cause as the greatest service which he could perform for his country....”

Another insight we have into the principles for which Melville stood comes in that meeting with King James the VI in which he called him “God’s sillie vassal”. What he said on
that occasion was in part as follows, “Sir...there are two kings and two kingdoms in Scotland: there is Christ Jesus the King of the Church, whose subject King James the Sixth is, and of whose kingdom he is not a king, nor a lord, nor a head, but a member...We will yield to you your place, and give you all due obedience; but again I say, you are not the head of the Church; you cannot give us that eternal life which even in this world we seek for, and you cannot deprive us of it. Permit us then freely to meet in the name of Christ, and to attend the interests of that Church....”

Melville’s leadership in the cause of civil and ecclesiastical liberty was eventually to see him unjustly imprisoned in the Tower of London. After four years of confinement, he was banished to France, where he lived out the last days of his seventy-seven years.

A Heritage of Courage

We have managed only a glimpse of Andrew Melville. He was ardent of spirit. Wylie says of him and others of his nation and era, “These men may have been rough in speech; they may have permitted their temper to be ruffled, and their indignation to be set on fire, in exposing craft and withstanding tyranny; but that man’s understanding must be as narrow as his heart is cold, who would think for a moment of weighing such things in the balance against the priceless blessing of a nation’s liberties.”

If there was fire in the person of Andrew Melville, there was also that kindness which is the fruit of the Spirit. McCrie tells us that, when one of the men of rank who had been one of Melville’s most violent enemies was reduced to poverty, Andrew forgave him for the wrongs he had suffered from him and “supported him for some months out of his own purse.”

In the nearly thirty years of his unceasing activity in behalf of his nation and the Church of Scotland, Melville served with never failing courage. Illustrative of that courage is a scene involving one of Scotland’s regents. A few years after his return to Scotland, the Regent Morton said to Melville, “There will never be quietness in this country till half-a-dozen of you be hanged or banished.” Melville’s reply to him was, “Tush, Sir, to threaten your courtiers after that manner. It is the same to me whether I rot in the air or in the ground. The earth is the Lord’s. My country is wherever goodness is.”

Wylie pays the highest tribute to Melville when he says, “...the public liberties as well as the Protestantism of Scotland would have perished but for the vigilance and intrepidity of the Presbyterian ministers, and, above all, the incorruptible, the dauntless and unflinching courage and patriotism of Andrew Melville.”

We of this nation owe men of the faith and courage of Melville an immense debt. Nineteenth century American Presbyterian David Breed in his little book, Presbyterians and the Revolution, documents that it was the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who were in the forefront of the struggles which freed colonial America from the tyranny of King George and gave us the legacy of civil and ecclesiastical liberty which are asserted in the “Declaration of Independence” and guaranteed in the Constitution’s “Bill of Rights”. One such contributor was Scotland’s own
John Witherspoon, who came to this country to be the president of the College of New Jersey and was a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

Reading of the life of Andrew Melville, his incessant labors, his sacrifices, his sufferings, one thinks of the line from the epistle to the Hebrews, “of whom the world was not worthy.”

Quotes are from the following books:

*The History of the Church of Scotland* by W.M. Hetherington
*The Life of Andrew Melville* by Thomas McCrie
*Presbyterians and the Revolution* by David Breed