



COVENANT RECOLLECTIONS

By G. M. Robb

COVENANT RECOLLECTIONS

By G. M. ROBB

Published by

National Staff

Covenanter Young People's Union

737 Midland Street, Pittsburgh 21, Pa.

1959

What does it mean to be a Covenanter? Why did President Woodrow Wilson, on occasion, boast that he had Covenanter blood in his veins? Why does the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* declare that to the Covenanters goes the credit of preserving civil and religious liberty at a time when the world was in grave danger of losing these things?

Who were the Covenanters of Scotland, whom we claim as our spiritual ancestors? How did they get the name "Covenanter"? And, after all, why go away back into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? We are living in the atomic age. Our hope is not centered in the things that took place four centuries ago! Our hope is in what will happen this year, and next year, and the next.

Nevertheless we would do well to remember the wisdom of Kipling's lines:

"Lord God of Hosts, Be with us yet,
Lest we forget! Lest we forget!"

The things that happened in Scotland four centuries ago are happening to us right now. They may be wearing a different suit of clothes; but they are the same things! It could prove to be exceedingly practical to review something of the way those men handled it in the days of long ago.

To see what happened and why it happened, we need to go back a little further than the sixteenth century. We need to go back to the time of Julius Caesar. In the year 55 B.C. Caesar invaded the British Isles. His famous general Agricola hurled his far-famed Roman legions against the Scots—they called them "Caledonians" in those days—on the slopes of Mons Graupius. The Scots had broad swords and little round shields. The Roman soldiers had pointed swords and great broad shields. They pushed the Scots right up the hill! For it must be admitted, the Romans had better weapons. They did not have better men! They defeated the Scots in battle again and again. They never conquered them.

Scotland never became a part of the Roman Empire! That should be kept in mind. Another thing to keep in mind is that during those three

centuries of persecution that the Caesars visited upon the Christians, many Christians fled from the areas of persecution and found their way back to the British Isles. Original early church Christianity was the kind that first appeared in Scotland.

OUR PRESBYTERIAN ROOTS

Nearly everyone has heard of St. Patrick. Patrick was born in Scotland. Actually, Patrick did not chase the snakes out of Ireland. Instead, he went as a missionary to Ireland; and he founded three hundred and sixty-five churches in Ireland, each with its pastor and seven or eight elders. Patrick, of Scotland, carried pure Presbyterianism into Ireland in the year 431 A.D.

By the year 560 A.D. there was to be found on the Island of Iona, just off the coast of Scotland, a religious group called the "The Culdees." The name means "The servants of God." They were strict in their keeping of the Sabbath as a day holy unto God. They were pure in their worship. They were Presbyterian in their form of government. And they exerted a tremendous influence on the thinking of the men of Scotland.

It is a regrettable fact that by this time the Catholic Church was becoming more and more corrupt. The historian Turretin points out areas in which the Church had departed sadly from Scriptural teaching:

1. They were returning to idolatry, in that they were beginning to worship Mary, they were beginning to worship images, and they were beginning to worship the saints. Also they were re-establishing the practice of the adoration of dead men's bones and other sacred relics.

2. They were becoming profligate in their morals. Many of the Church's clergy lived lives of gluttony and greed. They were in it for the money. And many of them lived lives that were terribly immoral. Often the common people were far more pure in heart and life than their spiritual leaders.

3. They were becoming corrupt in doctrine. The church was teaching that men are not saved by the blood of Jesus Christ and by His atoning death on the Cross. Rather, the church maintained, men are justified by the good works of the saints, by penances and pilgrimages, by the dispensation of pardons by the clergy, etc.

4. They were becoming tyrannical in their government. The Pope at Rome told the kings what to do. The kings told their people what they were to do in church matters, and what they were to believe. The reading of the Word of God was made a criminal offense by the canon law of the Church.

OUR PROTESTANT HERITAGE

In the passing of time, the Roman Catholic Church gained the ascendancy in Scotland as well as in England and Ireland. But the Scottish people never quite got that early-church Presbyterianism out of their systems! When John Wycliff translated the Bible into the English language, the Scottish people were glad to receive copies of it. When Patrick Hamilton was burned alive at the stake for daring to say that the Pope of Rome is not infallible, the Scottish people began to say, "Patrick Hamilton was right! The Pope is not infallible!" The rulers of Scotland and the parliament of Scotland were becoming solidly Roman Catholic. But the people of Scotland were doing some thinking of their own! It seemed inevitable that a break must come between the Roman Catholic rulers of Scotland, and their *people*—whose sympathies were in the other direction.

There was another factor that entered in. Possibly this may be a new idea: but the fact is that the people of Scotland are noted for their thriftiness! And when their king, James VI of Scotland, married Margarett, the daughter of King Henry VII of England, both royal families really splurged in a big way. They staged a wedding, followed by a round of festivities that have seldom been equalled for revelry and costliness! When it was

all over, both governments were financially embarrassed! And if you think the people of Scotland were not disgusted over that kind of prodigal spending, then you haven't been reading enough Scottish jokes lately!

There was yet another factor that entered in. You women folks know what mule-headed stubbornness those Scotch-Irish husbands of yours can show, on occasion! They come by it honestly. Their Scottish ancestors could be stubborn men if the occasion called for it!

And the occasion arose that called for all the stubbornness they could muster. We had better thank God that it was a bunch of stubborn Scots who were facing that situation, and standing for their convictions, and showing that they had steel in their backbones. For the fact is, their Roman Catholic kings were trying to say to them, "What is good enough for your king is good enough for you! You men of Scotland are all going to forget about this Presbyterian stuff; and you are all going to get in line and be good Catholics."

That is when the men of Scotland became stubborn! They said, in reply, "We are not bound to obey the king if the king is contrary to the teachings of the Bible." And they banded themselves together to bring the nation into covenant with God.

At Doorne, in 1556, they covenanted that they would "refuse all society with idolatry"—for that is what they called the images of the Church of Rome.

At Edinburgh, in 1557, the Lords of the Congregation drew up a covenant in which they said, "We shall, with all diligence, continually apply our whole power, substance, and our very lives, to maintain, set forward, and establish the blessed Word of God." That was signed by the Earl of Argyle, the Earl of Glencairn, the Earl of Morton, and by Lord Lorn, and John Erskine of Dun. They were stubborn men, for they were standing by their deepest convictions. I wonder if you noticed how their statement compares with the concluding statement of the American *Declaration of Independence*. The *Declaration of Independence* concludes: "And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance upon the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor." The Covenant of 1557 declares, "We shall, with all diligence, continually apply our whole power, substance, and our very lives, to maintain, set forward, and establish the blessed Word of God."

Thomas Jefferson wrote the *Declaration of Independence*. By the process of comparison it

becomes evident that he drew from earlier Covenant sources for many of his ideas. Among those sources were: the *Sanquhar Declaration* by Richard Cameron; the *Octorara Declaration* of the Covenanters of Pennsylvania; and the *Mecklenburg Declaration* of the Carolina Covenanters and Presbyterians. But that is getting somewhat far afield!

In 1559 another Covenant was drawn up: this time, at Perth. In it, the signers pledged that they would "put away all things that dishonor His Name, that God may be truly and purely worshipped."

The Covenant of 1560, drawn up at Edinburgh, pledged "to procure, by all means possible, that the truth of God's Word may have free passage within this realm."

Then the men of Scotland discovered that the Pope at Rome was telling all of his Roman Catholics in Scotland to pretend that they were accepting Protestant beliefs, so as to get into the positions of power in the government. In that way, so the Pope thought, the nation of Scotland could be brought back to Roman Catholicism. When the Pope's scheme was found out, these Scottish Presbyterians added to their Covenants by drawing up the National Confession of 1580

which came out in the open and "renounced all Papistry, with its authority, dogmas, rites, and decrees."

OUR COVENANTED PROFESSION

In the meantime, Henry VIII of England had broken with the Roman Catholic Church and had established the Church of England, with himself as its head. His daughter was Queen Elizabeth. When she died, King James VI of Scotland had a stronger claim to the throne of England than anyone else. So, he became King James I, King of England and Scotland. He was head of the Church of England; therefore he forgot all about his supposed duty to the Pope and issued orders that all of his people in England and Scotland were to become members of the Church of England!

The King James Version of the Bible was named for this King James. It isn't that he translated it! It was translated by forty-seven scholars who worked on it for seven years. But King James I helped to finance the work of translation. And the King James Version was made when the English language was at its purest and best.

King James I died in 1625. He was succeeded by his son, Charles I, who had a Roman Catholic wife. Charles I sent Archbishop Laud up to Scotland to compel those Scots to stop all this Pres-

byterian nonsense and fall into line as good members of the Church of England. Laud ordered the Scottish ministers to read from the *King James Book of Sports for Sabbath Afternoon*. The Covenanter ministers read from the *Book of Sports* as commanded; then they followed their reading by preaching fiery sermons on "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy."

Archbishop Laud ordered the Scottish ministers to wear robes, and to use the prayer book and ritual of the Church of England, in these Reformation Presbyterian Churches—these Covenanter Churches—of Scotland, commencing on Sabbath, July 23rd, 1637. The Scottish people would not stand for it!

At St. Giles Church in Edinburgh, the Rev. John Henderson conducted the regular service, knowing that it was likely the last time he would ever do so. Then the Dean from the Church of England entered the pulpit and began to read the ritual of the Church of England. The audience began to stamp and scrape their feet on the floor. Then Jeannie Geddes, a Scottish market woman who had been sitting on a stool, arose to her feet with the cry that "mass ought never to be said in that church!" And she hurled her stool at the Dean's head! Whereupon the whole congregation arose and drove the Dean from the building.

These Reformation Presbyterians of Scotland had succeeded in resisting Popery,—the Roman Catholic Church. Now they were in danger from Prelacy,—the Church of the Prelates: in other words, the Church of England.

They began sending petitions to King Charles I, asking him not to force Prelacy upon them—begging him to allow them to worship in the way they believed the Bible taught. But Charles was a man of very little sense. He failed to see that he was facing a determined people who would stand by their convictions. He refused all petitions.

Whereupon these Scottish Presbyterians forever earned for themselves the name of "Covenanters" by what they did next.

In 1638 they drew up what is known in history as *The National Covenant of Scotland*. Early in the morning of March 31, 1638, the people began to gather at Greyfriars Church Yard. It is said that nearly sixty thousand of them came, from all parts of Scotland. Only a few could have any hope of finding a place inside the building; the rest waited outside. Inside the Church, Alexander Henderson constituted the assembly with a fervent prayer, in the Name and by the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. Then Archibald Johnson

—Lord Warriston—read the Covenant. As he was making his way down the aisle to the front of the Church, he whispered to a friend, “Probably I’ll hang for this!” He did hang for it a few years later!

These are a few sentences from *The National Covenant of Scotland!*

“Because we plainly perceive, and undoubtedly believe, that the innovations and evils contained in our supplications, complaints, and protestations, have no warrant in the Word of God, are contrary to the articles of our Confession, to the intention and meaning of the blessed Reformers of religion in this land, to the above-written acts of Parliament:

“Therefore, from the knowledge and conscience of our duty to God, to our King and country, without any worldly respect or inducement . . . we promise and swear, by the great name of the Lord our God, to continue in the profession and obedience of our Reformed religion.”

In other words, they were loyal to their King. They were ready to fight, to defend him. But they refused to allow him to force his church on anyone else’s church upon them. They reserved to themselves the right of religious liberty.

After the Covenant was read, there was a long silence. The time had come to sign it. And yet, everyone felt the responsibility of what they were doing. They were revolting against their King! They knew that by engaging in this Covenant they were calling down upon themselves all of the horrors of religious persecution. No wonder there was a long silence.

Then John Henderson, a white-haired old man, a descendant of John Knox, walked to the front and said, “Brethren, to hesitate now will be to commit ourselves and our children to religious bondage! He took up the pen and signed his name.

There were four copies of the Covenant: one in the Church, one in the Church yard, and two out in the cemetery where two flat gravestones were being used as tables. Some took their penknives and cut their veins enough to draw blood; then they dipped the pen in their own blood, and signed. All day long, men were signing the Covenant.

When the signing was completed, there was another long pause. What if they should prove unfaithful to their vows? With one accord they all raised their right hands and said as a pledge of loyalty and allegiance to the Covenant and to its vows, the words of Exodus 24:7,

"All that the Lord hath said will we do and be obedient."

When King Charles heard of all this, he ordered the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland to dissolve, never to meet again. The Scottish people refused to obey the order. The open struggle was on!

Five years later, down in England, King Charles and his Parliament were at loggerheads. There was, in fact, a state of civil war between King Charles I and Parliament. The members of Parliament were not in favor of letting the King dictate *their* religion to *them!* The King's armies engaged in open war with the armies raised by Parliament. The battle of Edge Hill was fought, without any very decisive results.

Whereupon the English Parliament turned to the Scottish people for help. The result was one of the most remarkable documents of modern times,—*The Solemn League and Covenant*. Robert Burns, in one of his poems, declared of it that it "sealed Freedom's sacred cause." President Woodrow Wilson got his idea for the "Covenant of the League of Nations" from *The Solemn League and Covenant*.

It bound the British people to the preserving of their rights and privileges. It bound them to pro-

tect the person and authority of their king. It guaranteed them the right to believe and worship in the way they believed the Bible taught. It brought the Church back to a Biblical basis, and back to its allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ and to His Law in civil and religious matters.

It was sworn to, and subscribed, at St. Margaret's Church at Westminster; and by the British Parliament and by the Westminster Assembly, in 1643. Following its adoption, a mighty revival of religion swept the land. Men and women in those lands of the Covenants were turning to the Lord by the tens of thousands.

But before long, Charles II was on the throne. He repudiated the Covenants as soon as he was crowned king, and declared them all to be null and void. Instead of continued blessing and revival, there followed the "Killing Times" and the "War of Extermination"—when Covenanter ministers were driven from their churches and manses, and when their people joined them in conventicles out in the open fields. During these desperate days the King's dragoons were turned loose on the people with orders to shoot Covenanters who would not recant. An estimated eighteen thousand Covenanters lost their lives because they stood up for civil and religious liberty against the arbitrary and despotic Stuart kings.

During all this time quite a number of Covenanters left Scotland and Ireland and took refuge in the New World. They settled at first in Pennsylvania, New York, and the Carolinas. Then they moved up into New England. As time went by, they joined the westward movement of the growing nation. They looked back to the *National Covenant of Scotland* and the *Solemn League and Covenant*, and subscribed to them insofar as "applicable in this land." But with the passing of the years, new issues were arising.

There was a time in the history of the Covenanter Church in this country, when for a period of sixteen years she had no ministers. During those sixteen years, the elders held the Church together and carried on the oversight of the congregations. It was during that period of sixteen years that our nation's Federal Constitution came into being, with its omission of all acknowledgments of God, and of the authority and law of Jesus Christ. It was during that period of sixteen years that the Covenanter Church came to its historic position of political dissent. The recognition of political dissent as the only consistent position for a "born-again" Christian to take, came—not from the ministers, but from the laymen! It came during those years when the Church had no ministers.

In the New World, Covenanters were facing issues different from those that led to the earlier Covenants. Therefore, in 1871, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America subscribed and swore to *The Covenant of 1871*. It dealt with the issues of the day. It re-affirmed our belief in the Bible as the Word of God, and in the Reformed Faith as the only sound interpretation of the Bible. It dealt with our denominational tenets, viz: purity of worship, the open and separated life, political dissent, and the Scriptural doctrines of the Church. It set forth our application of the Gospel to the land in which we were living.

The Covenant of 1871 was signed by seventy-four ministers, seventy elders, and nine students of theology from the Seminary. Copies were sent down to the congregations; and services of Covenant-signing were held in the different congregations of the Church. The pledge of the Covenanter Young People's Union, which begins, "Aiming to live for the glory of God as our chief end," is one of the paragraphs of the *Covenant of 1871*.

More recently, in the *Short Covenant* which was sworn to and subscribed at the Church's National Conference at Grinnell, Iowa, in 1954, the Covenanter Church again entered into covenant with God. The descendants of those stubborn Scotch

Covenanters of long ago swore to and signed the *Short Covenant of 1954*. And their women stood with them!

Let this be said to the women of the Covenanter Church: If you find yourself married to a Scotchman or an Irishman or a Swede or an Italian or any other nationality that occasionally manifests a streak of mulish stubbornness, thank God that you are married to a man who has what it takes to stand by his convictions and refuse to back down.

In the state of California they are culling out of the schools the textbooks that have anything to say about God. Their attorney general has ruled that there are to be no more Christmas celebrations in the California schools.

In New Jersey, their attorney general has ruled that school children in the lunch rooms will not be permitted to say a blessing or have a prayer of thanks for the food that God has provided; nor will they be permitted to bow their heads individually for a silent prayer of thanks.

A part of your American tax dollar goes to the support of UNESCO with its World Health Organization. A division of this World Health Organization is the World Federation for Mental Health whose Dr. G. B. Chisholm said in an ad-

dress in Washington, D.C.: "For many generations we have bowed our necks to the yoke of conviction of sin. We have swallowed all manner of poisonous certainties fed us by our parents, our Church and Day School teachers, our priests, and others with a vested interest in controlling us." He went on to declare that the future hope of the human race is not in morality, but in psychiatry. And your tax dollar is going to help support such a program. You are not being asked whether you want to support such a program of planned paganism. You are not being asked! You are just being taxed!

THE CHALLENGE TODAY

Our Covenanter forefathers in Scotland stood out stubbornly against the religious tyranny of their day. We may have to become a little stubborn in face of the irreligious tyranny that is springing up all around us. Back in that Covenant of 1557 they said, "We shall, with all diligence, continually apply our whole power, substance, and our very lives, to maintain, set forward, and establish the blessed Word of God." In our *Short Covenant of 1954* we have said, "We believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and life . . . We . . . oppose all the systems, religious and secular, that undermine

faith in the Scriptures, in the Deity of Jesus Christ, and His redemptive work."

Those Covenanting men of Scotland could be a stubborn bunch, if they felt the occasion called for it! If ever men have been faced with a situation that called them to stand by their convictions, we are faced with such a situation today!

"Lord God of Hosts, Be with us yet!
Lest we forget! Lest we forget!"