



The Scots Confession, 1560

The Birth of a Confession

The persecution of the Reformers in Scotland eased slightly in the 1550s as the Regent, Mary of Guise, initially tolerated the reforming party. She was however only securing her power-base until Mary, her daughter, was married to Francis II of France. At this she began to raise the army against the Protestants in Perth. In response the Reformers agreed to give up their stronghold on two conditions:

- 1) That no foreign garrison be imposed on Perth.
- 2) That Parliament be convened to deal with the religious questions in dispute.

Mary soon broke the spirit of this pact by stationing troops at Perth, in the pay of the French. The Protestant Lords raised their own forces and Mary retreated first to Edinburgh then to Dunbar. Once in Edinburgh the Lords issued a proclamation deposing the Regent. They sought help from the English Queen Elizabeth I, while Regent Mary cried to the French. Both sent troops by sea, but the English blockaded the Firth of Forth, disappointing Mary's hopes of assistance. She died in Edinburgh on June 11th 1560.

It would be more than a year before her daughter, Mary Queen of Scots, arrived to take the throne. The Protestants made use of that vacuum. Parliament met fully on August 1st 1560. The Protestant nobility petitioned Parliament, seeking the abolition of Popery. The petition of the Protestants made a challenge:

'We offer ourselves to prove, that in all the (rabble of the clergy) there is not one lawful minister, if God's word, the practice of the apostles, and their own ancient laws shall judge of lawful election. We further offer ourselves to prove them all thieves and murderers: yea, rebels and traitors to the lawful authority of empires, kings and princes; and therefore unworthy to be suffered in any reformed commonwealth.'

Parliament formally directed Protestant noblemen and ministers to draw up *'in plain heads, the sum of that doctrine which they would maintain, and would desire this present Parliament to establish as wholesome, true, and only necessary to be believed and received within that realm'*.

In essence the Parliament took up the challenge. They wanted to see the proof.

Over the next four days, *The Scots Confession* was drafted by six ministers: John Winram, John Spottiswoode, John Willock, John Douglas, John Row, and John Knox. On 17th August 1560, the document was read before Parliament. Protestant ministers stood on edge, waiting for a challenge, eager to defend the cause of truth. Yet it never came. The best the enemies of Reformation could come up with was, *'We will believe as our fathers believed.'* When the vote was taken, the Confession was ratified, with only a few dissenting voices. Catholic Bishops said nothing at all.

John Row, one of those who drafted the confession, said that they 'took not their pattern from any kirk in the world, no, not from Geneva itself; but, laying God's Word before them, made reformation according thereunto, both in doctrine first, and then in discipline. The first General Assembly met in December 1560 and approved both the Confession and the 1st book of Discipline.

1. The Need for the Confession

The Preface to the Scots Confession is both solemn and impressive. In it the six Johns explain why they needed to put down in writing and commit to the scrutiny of the world, what they believed. It is a preface charged with emotion, written by men who had witnessed such a great change in their country. Just a few decades before, Scotland was smeared with the oil-slick of superstition, ignorance and poverty that came on the back of Romanism. Scotland officially persecuted, hounded and slandered any of the reforming viewpoint. More than that, the nation had tried and tortured their friends, and murdered them in the name of justice. Now these six men were writing this *Confession* at the behest of their nation, through Parliament! They wrote expecting that it would be accepted as the creed of Scotland! The voice of the writers comes through so clearly in this Preface:

'The Estates of Scotland, to their natural countrymen, and unto all other realms and nations, professing the same Lord Jesus with them, wish grace, mercy, and peace ... Long have we thirsted, dear brethren, to have notified unto the world the sum of that doctrine which we profess, and for the which we have sustained infamy and danger. But such has been the rage of Satan against us, and against Christ Jesus' eternal verity lately born amongst us, that to this day no time has been granted unto us to clear our consciences, as most gladly we would have done ... But seeing that, of the infinite goodness of our God, we have obtained some rest and liberty, we could not but set forth this brief and plain confession partly for satisfaction of our brethren, partly for stopping of the mouths of impudent blasphemers. But we have chief respect to our weak and infirm brethren, to whom we would communicate the bottom of our hearts, lest that they be troubled or carried away by diversity of rumours, which Satan spreads contrary (against) us...'

The Reformers were clear — they needed a Confession. It wasn't an extra, it wasn't a preference. They felt it as necessary from the bottom of their hearts. To grasp this alone will make studying this subject worthwhile. Their earnestness and eagerness to set down exactly what God had done for them and exactly what they believed to be the truth of the Bible was not cold, scholastic or exhausting. It was exhilarating, joyful, yearned for!

2. The Meat of the Confession

The Confession is in two main sections. The first 12 chapters are historical (don't be put off by 12 chapters. They are really just paragraph points. All 12 chapters can be read in 30 minutes). It begins with God, the eternal, triune God, the Creator of all things. Then comes the Fall, the doctrine of sin and the Evangel from Genesis 3 on to the Incarnation. Some pages cover Christ as God and Man in one Person. Next comes election, of His people, and of the chosen Messiah; His Incarnation, Suffering, Death, Resurrection and Ascension.

The second section is more doctrinal. These 13 chapters cover the doctrines that flow from the completion of the redemption of Christ. These show the contradictions between the biblical position and that taken by the Roman church. As an example, the chapters dealing with good works show us the necessity of the Spirit, the perfection of the law and the impossibility of good works leading to, or being the cause of, salvation.

The Church is also considered, in its unity and catholicity. Its nature includes families; its only head is declared to be Christ. Consideration is given to the marks of the church as: the preaching of the Word; right keeping of the sacraments; and upkeep of discipline. Rome's claims for herself that her antiquity, her title, her succession, or her sheer numbers, indicate she is the true church are dismissed by biblical example. The sacraments are given detailed examination over three chapters, and the confession closes with a look at the role of the state powers and then the gifts of the church.

Chapter 19 is very short and yet key to all. It reads:

'As we believe and confess the Scriptures of God sufficient to instruct and make the man of God perfect, so do we affirm and avow the authority of the same to be of God, and neither to depend on men nor angels. We affirm, therefore, that such as allege the Scripture to have no

authority, but that which is received from the kirk, to be blasphemous against God, and injurious to the true kirk, which always hears and obeys the voice of her own Spouse and Pastor, but takes not upon her to be mistress over the same.'

Satan has spent centuries portraying the Reformed Confessions as being a bad thing. He pretends that for Reformed Christians they are in place of Scripture, as if Reformed Christians feel they can dispense with Scripture because they have Confessions. So it is very much in fashion today to claim that confessions are not needed, that they are a hindrance, that they obscure and obstruct the teachings of the Bible.

But hear the charge of the six Johns: *'If any man will note in this our confession any article or sentence repugning to God's holy word, that it would please him of his gentleness, and for Christian charity's sake, to admonish us of the same in writing; and we, of our honour and fidelity, do promise unto him satisfaction from the mouth of God (that is, from his holy Scriptures), or else reformation of that which he shall prove to be amiss.'* Their hearts were so set on being biblical that they would be glad to learn to be more biblical. What a solid foundation that gives their confession. Its one aim is to be biblical. It is so biblical that it admits its own fallibility, its own errancy compared to the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible. Yet until and unless anyone can show their teachings to be out of step with the Bible they vow to hold on to it with their last breath as their sincere and best understanding of what God intends in his Word. The *Scots Confession of Faith* went on to be adopted by the first General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in December 1560. It was again ratified by the Scots Parliament in 1567 and it remained the subordinate standard of the Scottish Kirk until the adoption of the more full and considered Westminster Confession of Faith 80 years later.

3. The Fruit of the Confession

The Reformation was a mighty outpouring of the Spirit of God on Scotland. It is to God alone that all glory belongs. So when we think about the fruit of the Confession, we are looking for evidences of God's blessing. Now neither the Confession itself, nor its writers, take any credit or glory except insofar as God used them. But we would miscall the hand of God if we did not identify fruit from it.

The Scots Confession was used by God to bring the very best kind of unity — unity around the Word of God. That is the unity we crave. We long for that kind of unity amongst all true churches. The reason we get weary so often when we hear yet another call for church unity is only because it does not have this basis.

By God's grace the Scots Confession united a parliament and indeed the nation under the parliament. It united the reformed congregations into that single body of the reformed Kirk of Scotland. And it maintained that unity for most of a century, until it could hand over its duties to the Westminster Confession of Faith a document better suited to the purpose. By then the six Johns were long gone but you get the impression that they would have been very pleased indeed to withdraw their Confession in favour of the document that came from Westminster. After all, that is exactly the spirit of their preface. The Scots Confession was never actually repealed and still technically stands as a confession of the Scottish church.

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