



John Davidson of Prestonpans

If not one of the first three mighty men of the Scottish Reformation, John Davidson was undoubtedly prominent amongst those valiant men used to preserve and promote Presbyterian Protestantism in the difficult years between the death of John Knox in 1572 and his own death in 1604.

Through faith...

Born around 1549 to moderately wealthy parents in Dunfermline, the scene of one of the first Reformed ministries in Scotland, Davidson as a boy knew the Lord and took an interest in the dramatic religious, political and military events of his youth. After graduating in 1570 he remained in St Andrews to teach and there enjoyed the public preaching of the frail and dying Knox and fellowship with him at his family devotions twice daily. A poem he wrote in praise of Knox in 1573 revealed his own commitment to thorough Reformation. Another poem, criticising the Regent Morton's proposal on economic grounds to make one minister serve up to four parishes, resulted in his being outlawed and exiled in England and on the Continent from 1574 to 1577.

Returning to Scotland, he ministered at Liberton, 1579-84, at Edinburgh New Kirk (part of St Giles) in 1589, at the Second Charge (Canongate) from 1590, and at Prestonpans, 1595-1604. Unpopular with the government because of his faithfulness, particularly for pronouncing the Church's sentence of deposition and excommunication on Robert Montgomery, appointed bishop of Glasgow by the king contrary to the will of the Church, he for a time required an armed guard between his manse and church at Liberton.

In 1584 he fled to England to escape danger to his liberty and life caused by his opposition to laws confirming episcopacy and royal supremacy in spiritual matters and by his defence of Protestant nobles who had in the Raid of Ruthven (1582) kidnapped the young James VI to deliver him from Romanist influence. His objection to the imposition of prelacy, to unbiblical ritual in worship and to civil restraints on Church discipline, later provoked James VI (whom he had often personally rebuked for his swearing, Sabbath breaking and Church politics) to imprison him in Edinburgh Castle in 1601 and confine him to Prestonpans until his death.

Advocate of Presbytery

Knox lived to see the establishment in Scotland of the Reformed Faith, outlined in the Scots Confession, and recognition of the Church whose doctrine and worship accorded with the Confession and whose government and discipline were in the hands of assemblies of ministers and elders. But before he died (1572) resolute attempts were being made to undermine the essentially Presbyterian polity of the Church. The Black Acts of 1584 asserted royal supremacy and imposed episcopacy on the church.

An Act of 1592 — "the *Magna Carta* of Presbyterianism" — granted renewed legal recognition to the reformed faith, Presbyterian government and spiritual independence of the Scottish Church. James VI and his successors tried, however, for almost another 100 years, to make the Church a state department with bishops as the monarch's agents. While Davidson advocated a Christian Church together with a Christian state, each within its own province promoting a society conformed to the will of God, he strongly resisted attempts by the civil authorities to interfere with the Biblical and Presbyterian polity of the Church. He was equally opposed to ministers becoming involved in civil government.

Davidson contended for the Presbyterianism outlined in the *Second Book of Discipline* (1578) on the basis of its Biblical warrant, its expression of church unity at the level of government as well as of creed and experience, and its potential for preserving and promoting Biblical doctrine, worship and discipline. Spiritual concerns and not personal or nationalistic stubbornness made him an outspoken opponent of every measure which prevented the church from conducting her affairs according to the Word of God.

Preacher of the Word

Although much involved in Assembly and Committee work and often the Church's representative before the civil authorities, Davidson was primarily a preacher-pastor. His objection to having one minister responsible for several parishes was based on his conviction that the Reformation would be extended by filling the land with God-sent, Biblically-qualified preachers and pastors. Morton's scheme would leave congregations without weekly Sabbath sermons, and pastors without the intimate oversight of their people, which Davidson regarded as a prerequisite and extension of their preaching. Agreement to anything less than a minister for every manageable unit of population would frustrate permanently the progress of the gospel. His own ministry, particularly in Prestonpans, exemplified the type of pastoral ministry centred on preaching which was his vision for every parish in Scotland.

Davidson's reputation as a preacher is seen in his frequent appointment to preach before the king and on other special occasions but he was most at home in his own pulpit. While his preaching evoked a violently hostile reaction from some it was much blessed to awaken the consciences of saints and sinners. Preaching amongst the Puritans in England during his exile he became known as "the Thunderer".

He had a low estimate of his own preaching but clear objectives for it. When under consideration for Prestonpans he preached a sermon from Matthew 4:16 to indicate the line he would follow should he be called. The lessons he drew from his exposition of the text were:

- *"First, the miserable blind estate of man by nature, without Christ.*
- *Secondly, the most comfortable light of salvation in Christ.*
- *Thirdly, that men receive Christ's light by faith wrought by the Holy Spirit in the preaching of the gospel.*
- *Fourthly, the end, that walking in that light of Christ we may glorify Him that has translated us out of darkness into His wonderful light."*

Catechist

The substance of his preaching is illustrated in the Catechism he published in 1602 to help "*young scholars in Christianity*", and which he used for examination before the Communion and for catechising in the Church at Prestonpans every Sabbath day. When he gathered together those intending to come for the first time to the Lord's Table he addressed and questioned them on four important areas of doctrine and experience.

Our miserable estate by nature — the fact of guilt and depravity, the fall of Adam as cause and the wrath of God as consequence:

"for except ye be surely persuaded of this point and acknowledge it to be most true, all our teaching and all your hearing is but in vain. For what count makes any of a Physician or Mediciner that perceiveth and feeleth no sickness? And what account can we make of the doctrine of salvation that are ignorant of our condemnation and the cause thereof?"

Our redemption — comes not from man, devil or angel but only from the Lord our God, "*not of nature but of grace*", through the "*precious blood*" and "*powerful resurrection*" of Christ, "*for performing of which two parts of a perfect Saviour, in suffering and overcoming, it behooved him to be God and man in one person*".

Our union with Christ and assurance of salvation — *"faith only receives Christ, whereby He dwells in our hearts. Neither hope nor love nor any other heavenly gift has that office, but only faith. Hope as a watchman looks for the end of our faith, which is the salvation of our souls. And love is faith's handmaid and steward, disposing the graces and goods of faith, by evident demonstration, as it were, witnessing and declaring to ourselves and to others that we possess Christ by faith and have sure hope of enjoying salvation by Him ... Now this faith is ordinarily wrought by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Word, and by the sacraments increased and confirmed; so it is certain, where no preaching is, there ordinarily can be no faith, and where there is no faith, there is no Christ, and where there is no Christ, there is no salvation."*

Our thankfulness for so great and unspeakable a benefit — *"we may not think that we are redeemed from sin to live still in sin and take our pleasure therein as we did before we were called or believed."* The sanctification begun in regeneration will involve us in warfare between the new man and the old, which necessitates continual prayer.

Davidson also catechised each Sabbath, having two school children ask and answer questions in front of the congregation, so that the main principles of religion were covered every month and by repetition fixed in the memories of the people. Sometimes he departed from the catechism and asked easy questions of any man or child in the church, *"whereof (praised be God) both I and the party answering many times receive comfort and the Kirk edification"*.

Pioneer

The pre-Reformation Church at Prestonpans had been burned by English invaders in 1544. Since the Reformation the minister of Musselburgh preached there occasionally and some attended services at Tranent. The pioneering nature of John Davidson's work is seen in that he had to labour without remuneration, secure the provision of church, manse, school, schoolmaster's house and burial ground. In the school, Latin, Greek and Hebrew were taught. The first master had been rector of Edinburgh High School. Preaching after his induction from Acts 17:10-12 he stated that he did not accept such a great multitude *"to be a perpetual pastor but for a time till convenient occasion should be offered that they would be distributed in competent flocks"*. By preaching, catechising, visiting and providing literature and a school, he endeavoured to educate his people in the things of God, not without fruit.

Reformation and revival

Davidson was not satisfied merely with legislation providing for Biblical doctrine, government, discipline and worship. He longed for a living ministry and Church. The General Assembly in 1596 were requested by the king to support the raising of a tax to help defend the nation from threatened invasion by Spain but considered that priority belonged to an overture from the Presbytery of Haddington, initiated by Davidson, suggesting that the cause of threatened temporal judgements was God's wrath against them for their sins and that repentance was the great need of the hour. Davidson, at the Assembly's request, drew up charges against all sections of society, concentrating his attention on the ministry — *"that being sanctified by repentance they might be the meter to provoke others to the same"*. He was chosen to preach on the day of humiliation and prayer held during the Assembly.

It is amazing to read the detailed charges laid to the account of the ministry in those days when the Church of Scotland was admired by churches throughout the world for purity and spiritual power — defects in personal religion, lifestyle, preaching content and method, pastoral care and church discipline. It is more amazing to learn of the effect of the praying and preaching on the 400 commissioners who met from nine till after one to confess their sins to God and seek repentance — *"a sudden emotion took possession of the gathering as they humbled themselves, and for a quarter of an hour the building resounded with the sobbing of strong men"*. Similar scenes were witnessed at subsequent meetings of Presbyteries and Synods and as has often been the case the time of spiritual renewal helped to fortify the faithful for the decades of sore testing which lay ahead

during which leading ministers such as the Melvilles, Robert Bruce and John Welsh were banished.

The influence of this small, courageous man — *"a serious convincing preacher and a mighty wrestler in prayer"* (Wodrow) — has been traced on the human level to his personal piety and moral splendour. R. M. Gillon, his biographer, concludes that *"the intention of his soul was to bring all life into line with Christ's purposes, and his loyalty to his Master and His cause was so unquestionably great that he could not refrain from speaking out, wherever and whenever he saw error, ecclesiastical or moral"*. The earthly sacrifices to which he and his wife submitted, his zeal for the Church's conformity in every area of her life to the pattern of God's Word, his readiness to press the claims of God's Word on king and on society, his devotion to evangelistic and pastoral preaching of the Word and the building up of the Church at Prestonpans, his yearning for personal holiness, were inseparable parts of his one concern for the glory of his Lord.

HM Cartwright

© 2012

www.christianstudylibrary.org