

George Wishart

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Free Presbyterian Magazine – February, March 1952

IN 1543, in one of the Colleges of Cambridge, there was to be seen a tall, dark, bald, long-bearded, comely man, not much if anything above thirty years of age. His dress was always the same. He wore a black fustian doublet, a frieze gown that hung down to his feet, coarse black stockings, and a coarse canvass shirt; while on his head, and somewhat out of keeping with the rest, there was a round French cap, of newest shape and richest materials. It was obviously not poverty that made him dress so; for, the cap excepted, there was no part of his apparel that he did not part with weekly or monthly and give to the poor; and it was noticed too that the coarse new canvass sheets in which he slept, whenever needing to be changed, were in like manner given away.

Among the poor the ministrations of his charity were unremitting. Among the students, his aptness to teach, and the varied stores of scholarship that he took such pleasure in communicating, made him one of the most favourite of their tutors; while among all with whom he became familiar, his loving and loveable disposition, coupled with the easy manners of one well born, well read, well-travelled, made him one of the most agreeable of companions, and won towards him the tenderest attachment.

And yet there was a deep shade of sadness over those comely features, and in his manner a gravity beyond his years; for in his early boyhood he had been brought under the power of the world that is to come, and for the love he bare to his Redeemer he was now an exile in a foreign land. Very little is known of George Wishart's earlier years. He was a cadet of the family of Pittarow in Kincardineshire, and must have studied at St. Andrews. Five years before the time when we get our first distinct view of him during his residence at the University of Cambridge, and when his own education must barely have been completed, he had begun to teach the New Testament in the Greek tongue at Montrose. He was immediately suspected of heresy, and summoned before the Bishop of Brechin.

Rather than appear, he fled from Scotland, visiting the schools of Germany, returning then to Cambridge, and giving such a finish to his scholarship that in all branches of polite as well as theological learning, he stood almost without a rival among his countrymen. In 1544, resolved to brave all danger and to

devote himself exclusively to the religious enlightenment of his native land, he returned to Scotland. His great instrument was the pulpit, and, no lover by nature of controversy, he used that instrument purely as an evangelist. Had he lived, he would have been the Whitefield of the Reformation. As it was, the few months that he was permitted to give to his itinerant ministry exhibit the most extraordinary results.

He began in Montrose, and his pathetic eloquence at once drew crowds to hear him. At Dundee, to which he next removed, he gave a course of lectures on the Epistle to the Romans; and so clear were his expositions, and so stirring and affectionate his appeals, that multitudes heard the Word gladly, and many were brought to the knowledge of the truth. From the moment, however, that he had crossed the border, the eye of the Cardinal had been on him.

One day, as he had ended one of these lectures, a chief magistrate of the city stood up, and, in the Regent's name, prohibited him from again preaching, and troubling, as he called it, the city by his presence. Wishart heard the interdict, and musing on it for a little, turned sorrowfully to the people, and said, - "God is my witness that I never intended your trouble but your comfort; but sure I am that to refuse God's Word, and chase from you his messenger, shall not preserve you from trouble, but bring you to it. I have, at hazard of my life, remained among you, offering unto you the word of salvation; and now, since ye yourselves refuse me, I must leave my innocence to be declared by God; but when I am gone, God shall send you a messenger who will not be afraid either of burning or banishment."

Leaving Dundee, Wishart went to Ayrshire. There, vast concourses of people gathered round him as he preached, and many notable conversions took place. The Cardinal urged the Archbishop of Glasgow, the weak and fickle Dunbar, to interfere. Hearing that Wishart was to preach on a certain day in Ayr, the Archbishop thought that it would be a good way to keep him out of the pulpit to occupy it himself. The day came, the crowd assembled, but, to their surprise, the Archbishop was there, had got possession of the church, and declared it was his intention to preach himself. Some hot spirits would have used violence. "Let him alone," said the gentle Wishart, "his sermon will not do much hurt. Let us go to the market-cross." The sermon at the market-cross was delivered to gathered hundreds of thirsty hearers, and blessed to the spiritual benefit of many. The sermon in the church was brief and sufficiently harmless. Mounting the pulpit, and looking round on the almost empty benches, the

Archbishop said, - "They say that we should preach; why not? Better late thrive than never thrive; but hold us still for your bishop, and we shall provide better the next time." Such was the discourse, and next day it was discovered that the preacher was gone, nor was it ever known that he returned to fulfil his promise.

One Lord's day afterwards, Wishart was to preach in the church at Mauchline. The sheriff of the county came the night before, and, when the parishioners assembled, they found the church in possession of a band of armed men, who denied them entrance. The spirit of the people rose, and one of the chief proprietors, putting himself at their head, would have dislodged the intruders by force. "Brother," said Wishart, laying his hand upon him, and drawing him aside, "Christ Jesus is as mighty upon the fields as in the church, and I find that he himself preached oftener in the desert, at the sea-side, and other places judged profane, than in the temple at Jerusalem. It is the word of peace that God sendeth by me; the blood of no man shall be shed this day for the preaching of it."

And so saying, he led the people off to the edge of a wide moor, and there, standing on a dyke, discoursed to them for three hours, the multitude hanging all the while upon his lips. He had only been a few weeks in Ayrshire, when word was brought to him that the plague had broken out in Dundee. At once, and despite of all the remonstrance's of his friends, he hastened to the spot. He found the fearful malady at its height, hurrying its daily tale of victims to the grave. Those ears that had been closed before to the gospel message, they will be open now. But how can he address them without bringing together the healthy and the diseased, and so spreading the fatal contagion?

The day after his arrival, he took his station at the east gate of the town, inviting the infected, or those who had been in contact with the disease, to stand or sit all without the gate, and the others to stand or sit within. He never had such audiences as those that assembled daily there, and he never preached with such effect. His first well-chosen text was, -" He sent his word and healed them." And as the power and preciousness of God's word was unfolded, and the free offer of the gospel thrown liberally abroad and pressed home on every sinner, and the supreme happiness of those of Christ's people described "whom, by his own gentle visitation, God removeth from this vale of tears," he so raised up, we are told, "the hearts of those that heard him, that

they regarded not death, but judged them happier that should depart than such as should remain."

By night and day, from house to house, wherever there was a needy one to be ministered to, or a dying one to be comforted, there was Wishart, not only putting his own hand to every needful service, but so stirring up others that it was not known that a single person was left neglected. And this was the time that the Cardinal attempted his assassination. One day, as Wishart was preaching in the gate, a priest with a loose gown, beneath which his right hand was always closely kept, made his way through the crowd, and took up his position at the foot of the pulpit. The preacher's quick eye noticed him, perhaps had caught a glimpse of the naked weapon. Descending the steps and approaching to where he stood, before the man had time to strike, Wishart grasped the hand that held the dagger, wrenched from him the weapon, and, fixing his dark eye on him, said, "My friend, what would you have? Caught thus, the poor wretch fell upon his knees and confessed that he had been suborned to kill him. The people now had gathered in, and, hearing of the meditated deed, demanded with the utmost vehemence that the priest should be given up instantly to their vengeance. But Wishart took him in his arms, and, crying out, He that hurts him hurts me," he bore him away in safety.

Another base attempt of the same kind was a few weeks afterwards defeated in like manner. Wishart's conduct in both instances teaching us that had the occasion called for it, and had not a holier and more heavenly spirit possessed him, he had been as vigilant of eye, as cool in danger, as prompt to action, as the best of our mere battle-field heroes. When the plague left Dundee, Wishart visited Montrose. A letter bearing the signature of a well-beloved friend in the parish of Kilmany, in Fifeshire, was here put into his hands, purporting that his friend had been seized with a sudden and dangerous illness, and entreating him to come to him with all diligence. Wishart at once mounted the horse that the messenger had brought with him, and was already outside the town, when, stopping suddenly, he said to those who were accompanying him, - "I will not go; I am assured that there is treason. Go to yonder place, and tell me what ye find." They went to the place he indicated, and there in ambush were sixty well-armed men ready to have seized him. From Montrose, Wishart went to Edinburgh to meet there some friends from Ayrshire. On his way a strong presentiment of his approaching death and martyrdom took possession of him.

One night the friends in whose house he was staying watched him going out, and saw him with many sobs and groans first fall upon his knees and then upon his face, and continue so upon the ground for nearly an hour's space. They urged him in the morning to tell them what was weighing so heavily upon his heart. "I will tell you," said he, "that I am assured that my travail is near an end. Therefore, call to God for me, that I shrink not now when the battle waxeth most hot." "But," he added, as they began to weep, God shall send you comfort after me. This realm shall be illuminated with the light of Christ's gospel as clearly as ever was any realm since the days of the apostles. The house of God shall be builded in it, yea, it shall not lack the very copestone. Neither shall the time be long; there shall not many suffer after me." Not finding in Edinburgh the friends he came to meet, he put himself under the guidance and protection of Chricton of Brunston, Douglas of Longniddrie, and Cockburn of Ormiston, three tried friends of the Reformation in East Lothian. While with them, he preached at Inveresk, Tranent, and Haddington, numbers flocking to hear him.

Since the attempt upon his life at Dundee, some trusty friend had always been in the habit of bearing before him, when he appeared in public, a two-handed sword. This duty was now entrusted to one then young in years but ardent in faith, destined afterwards to be the chief instrument in the establishment of the Reformed faith in Scotland. His last sermon was preached in Haddington. At its close he took an affectionate farewell of his other friends, as he was going to spend the night at Ormiston. John Knox, who bore the sword before him that day, as usual, would have accompanied him, but he strictly forbade him, and ordered the sword to be given to another. "Nay," said he to him, as he still asked to be permitted to go, "return to your children, and God bless you. One is sufficient for the sacrifice."

That night the Earl of Bothwell and his band surrounded the house in which Wishart was lying, and after a solemn pledge, not long of being violated, that he would not give him up to the Cardinal, Wishart was committed to his hands. After lying a short time as a prisoner in the Castle of Edinburgh, he was carried to St. Andrews. It was in the end of January, 1546, that he arrived, and the Cardinal named the 27th of the following month as the day of his trial. He summoned a large convention of the clergy for that day, and wrote to the Regent, asking that a commission should be given to some noblemen to be present, and append the civil sanction to the sentence. Arran's conscience for the moment was touched, and he sent word in reply, "that he should not

precipitate the man's trial, but to delay it till his coming," protesting, that if the Cardinal did otherwise, "the man's blood would be required at his hands." The prelate's haughty answer bore, "That he wrote not unto the governor as though he depended in the matter upon his authority, but out of a desire he had that the heretic's condemnation might proceed with a show of public consent; which, since he could not obtain, he would be doing himself that which he held most fitting."

The narrative of the trial, of which a full account is preserved, is a painful record of the coarsest invective met with meekness, patience; and charity. On the 28th he was condemned to die next day. Permission was asked to administer to him the sacrament. It was refused. The night was spent in prayer. In the morning the captain of the castle invited him to breakfast with his family. The invitation was accepted. When all was ready at the table, Wishart rose: "I beseech you," he said, "in the name of God, and for the love you bear to our Saviour Jesus Christ, to be silent a little while, till I have made a short exhortation, and blessed the bread which we are to eat, so that I may bid you farewell."

All were silent around the table. With the utmost solemnity and entire composure, he then for nearly half-an-hour discoursed on the passion and death of Christ, exhorting to mutual love and holiness of heart and life; then giving thanks, he brake the bread, and, partaking of it himself, distributed to those around. Having done the same with a cup of wine that stood upon the table, he offered a short prayer, and adding, "I will eat and drink no more in this life," he bade them farewell, and retired to his chamber... Two executioners soon entered. They threw on him a black linen cloak, put a rope about his neck, an iron chain round his waist, and fastened some bags of gunpowder to different parts of his body. Thus prepared, they led him out to the appointed place. This had been chosen at the foot of what is called the Castle Wynd, nearly opposite to the eastern tower or corner of the castle, in order that, lolling on rich cushions laid down at a window in that tower, the Cardinal and his friends might feast their eyes with the spectacle.

On the scaffold, Wishart, addressing the people, said, "I beseech you, Christian brethren, that ye be not offended at the word of God, for the afflictions and torments that ye see already prepared for me. For that word's sake and true evangel, which was given to me by the grace of God, I suffer this day by men, not sorrowfully, but with a glad heart and mind. Consider and behold my

visage. Ye shall not see me change my colour. This grim fire I fear not. Some have said of me that taught that the soul of man should sleep till the last day; but I know surely, and my faith is such, that my soul shall be this night Mr. Gadsby and the Prayer, "Lord, Help Me!" with my Saviour in the heavens." Bending on his knees he offered up the prayer, - "I beseech thee, Father of heaven, to forgive them that have of any ignorance, or else of any evil mind, forged any lies upon me. I forgive them with all my whole heart. I beseech Christ to forgive them that have condemned me to death this day ignorantly." Rising from his knees he was bound to the stake, and thrice he cried aloud, "O Saviour of the world, have mercy upon me! Father of heaven, I commend my spirit into thy holy hands! "

The fire was kindled. The powder bags blew up. He was sadly scorched, but the captain of the castle, who stood near, perceiving that he was still alive, bade him be of good courage, and commend his soul to God. "This flame," said the dying martyr, "hath scorched my body, yet hath it not daunted my spirit; but he who from yonder high place beholdeth us with such pride shall within few days lie in the same as ignominiously as he is now seen proudly to rest himself." As he spake these words, one of the executioners drew the rope tight that was about his neck, the fire burned more fiercely around him, and in a short time the body was consumed to ashes.