

## The National Covenants

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NO doubt there is hardly one of our intelligent readers but knows something about the National Covenants of our country, and yet it is to be feared that many, especially of the younger generation, would find it difficult, if questioned, to give an intelligent account of their history, character, and aims. These Covenants were entered into during the most important periods in the history of this nation, and had much to do with the establishment of the kingdom of Christ in our midst. We all make our boast of the distinguished sufferings which our ancestors endured for Christ's Crown and Covenant; and the stimulating influence of their heroic lives and ever-memorable sacrifices is with us unto this day.

Surely it would be well, therefore, to have a clear understanding of their Covenants or Mutual Agreements in the cause of God and truth, which have had such an intimate connection with the history and life of vital Christianity in the land. Much has been written on the subject; it would be easy to refer our readers simply to books,<sup>1</sup> and so leave the matter, but a brief statement here of the facts historical and otherwise may not be without advantage to both old and young among us.

The Covenants were the results of the Reformations from Popery and Prelacy. The Reformation from Popery began to dawn about the beginning of the fifteenth century. James Resby, "an Englishman and scholar of Wicliffe," and Paul Craw, "a Bohemian and follower of Huss," then suffered martyrdom in Scotland for their faithful testimony against the errors of Rome. But it was not until the sixteenth century, when Patrick Hamilton and other Scottish witnesses died the martyr's death, that the Reformation had made so much progress as to encourage those who were emancipated from Popish error and superstition to band themselves together (formally and publicly) for the maintenance and advancement of God's truth in the country.

It is on record that those who were valiant for the truth entered into "bands," or covenants, at Dun in 1556, Edinburgh in 1557, Perth in 1559, and again at Edinburgh in 1560, the objects of which were to declare their renunciation of

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<sup>1</sup> The "Scots Worthies," "The Covenants and Covenanters," etc.

idolatry and all society with it, and to vow (as may be learned from the words of one of these covenants) that “we, by His grace, shall, with all diligence, continually apply our whole power, substance, and our very lives, to maintain, set forward, and establish the most blessed Word of God.”

In 1562 the Confession of Faith, prepared by John Knox and five other Reformers, was approved of by the three Estates of the kingdom and by the first General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. “The jurisdiction of the Bishop of Rome” was abolished within the bounds of the realm. In 1569 the Reformed Church was acknowledged by Act of Parliament as “the only true and holy kirk of Jesus Christ within this realm. The Reformation, which thus made such remarkable strides, had as one of its eminent fruits the great National Covenant of 1580.

The National Covenant was drawn up by Mr. John Craig, minister of Holyrood House, Edinburgh. It was signed by the King and his household and others, “to the glorie of God and the good example of all men,” at Edinburgh, on 21st day of January, 1580, and it purported to be “Ane Short and General Confession of the True Christiane Faith and Religion.”

It appears that the special circumstances that called for this renowned Covenant was a Jesuitical effort by the Pope to retain his hold of the kingdom, in connection with which he granted a secret dispensation to his followers to profess the Reformed religion, and at the same time to do all in their power to advance the interests of the Roman faith.

The National Covenant begins with a declaration by its subscribers to the effect that they are “thoroughly resolved in the truth by the Spirit and Word of God,” and that they confess and affirm “before God and the whole world the true Christian faith and religion, which now is, by the mercy of God, revealed to the world by the preaching of the blessed evangel received by Church and State as God’s eternal truth, and “expressed in the Confession of our Faith,” grounded upon God’s written Word. They then proceed to declare their detestation of all contrary religion and doctrine, and make particular reference to the Roman Antichrist, his “usurped authority upon the Scriptures of God, upon the Kirk, the civil magistrate, and consciences of men,” with specific mention of many of the erroneous opinions, superstitious practices, and corrupt decrees of Rome.

They conclude with a solemn oath to defend the king’s person and authority, according to the following terms :—“We shall defend his person and authority

with our goods, bodies, and lives, in the defence of Christ, His evangel, liberties of our country, ministration of justice, and punishment of iniquity, against all enemies within this realm or without, as we desire our God to be a strong and merciful defender to us in the day of our death, and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ; to whom, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be all honour and glory eternally. Amen.”

The time of this Covenant was a blessed one in the history of the Church of Scotland. Calderwood, the historian, writes; “The Kirk of Scotland was now come to her perfection, and the greatest purity that ever she attained unto, both in doctrine and discipline, so that her beautie was admirable to forraigne kirks. The assemblies of the sancts were never so glorious.”

The period of rest and external prosperity did not long continue. Soon Charles I began to exert a tyrannical authority over the Church. Knowing that Prelacy lent itself to his despotic schemes rather than Presbytery, the friend of freedom, he endeavoured to force the former system, with its bishops and canons, upon the Scottish people. But his efforts were largely in vain. Andrew Melville and other noble witnesses for God’s truth resisted the king’s encroachments upon the purity and liberty of the Church. Janet Geddes flung her stool at the Dean’s head in St. Giles, when he began to read Laud’s liturgy in divine worship, and this was the signal for a remarkable display of popular feeling against the inroads of Episcopacy.

The Council of the State vainly imagined that they could extinguish the agitation by a proclamation “condemning all meetings against the Episcopal Canons and Service Book,” but their attempts to suppress only fanned the fire into a more vehement flame. Satan, as he often has been, and will be, was outwitted by his own stratagems. The result was a public and most impressive renewal of the National Covenant, with additions for the times.

One of these additions was the following notable passage:—“And because, after due examination, we plainly perceive, and undoubtedly believe, that the innovations and evils contained in our supplications, complaints, and protestations, have no warrant of the Word of God, are contrary to the articles of the foresaid Confession, to the intention and meaning of the blessed reformers of religion in this land., to the above written Acts of Parliament, and do sensibly tend to the re-establishing of the Popish religion and tyranny, and to the subversion and ruin of the true reformed religion, and of our liberties, laws, and estates; we also declare, That the foresaid Confessions are to be

interpreted, and ought to be understood of the foresaid novations and evils, no less than if every one of them had been expressed in the foresaid Confessions; and that we are obliged to detest and abhor them, amongst other particular heads of Papistry abjured therein. And, therefore, from the knowledge and conscience of our duty to God, to our king and country, without any worldly respect or inducement, so far as human infirmity will suffer, wishing a further measure of the grace of God for this effect; we promise and swear, by the Great Name of the Lord our God, to continue in the profession and obedience of the aforesaid religion; and that we shall defend the same, and resist all these contrary errors and corruptions, according to our vocation, and to the uttermost of that power that God hath put in our hands, all the days of our life.”

The renewal of the National Covenant took place on the 28th February, 1638, in Greyfriars Churchyard, Edinburgh, and presents one of the most famous scenes in Scottish history. Alexander Henderson was the grand directing personality of that age, and his testimony about this memorable day, on which “Nobles, Gentlemen, Barons, Burgesses, and Commons” met to put their hands to the cause of God, was, that it was “the day of the Lord’s power,” the greatest day that had yet appeared in our Scottish Israel. Hundreds of copies of the Covenant were circulated throughout the kingdom, and were signed by all ranks and classes. Great success attended the efforts of the Reformers at this time. The King was reluctantly compelled to yield to their just claims. He abolished his courts and liturgies, and articles, and gave consent to the calling of a General Assembly of the Church, the first free Assembly that was held for the long period of forty-two years. It met in Glasgow on the 21st day of November, 1638.

The second great national agreement on behalf of truth was the Solemn League and Covenant, which was subscribed in St. Margaret’s Church, Westminster, on the 25th September, 1643. This document was animated by the same spirit and embodied the same principles as the former Covenant. It was, however, more comprehensive in its scope; was adopted by Englishmen as well as Scotsmen; and aimed at the furtherance of religion and reformation in the three kingdoms of Scotland, England, and Ireland. It is the crown of all the covenants ever entered into within the bounds of these realms, and has been well designated by Hetherington as “the noblest in its essential features of all that are recorded among the international transactions of the world.” Members of the English Parliament and the Westminster Assembly of Divines,

embracing representatives of both nations, lifted their hands in solemn oath to God, and declared their agreement with the terms of this Covenant.

This remarkable union in the faith resulted, through the wonderful providence of God, from the despotic measures of Charles, who compelled the peoples of both nations thus to band together for the defence of their civil and religious liberties, for the preservation of the reformed religion in the Church of Scotland, and for the reformation of religion in the kingdoms of England and Ireland. And all this was engaged in under the deepest sense of the need of humiliation before God for sin, and with the utmost dependence upon the grace of God for the accomplishment of their intentions.

Notice the concluding passage :—“ And because these kingdoms are guilty of many sins and provocations against God and His Son Jesus Christ, as is too manifest by our present distresses and dangers, the fruits thereof; we profess and declare, before God and the world, our unfeigned desire to be humbled for our own sins, and for the sins of these kingdoms; especially that we have not as we ought valued the inestimable benefit of the Gospel; that we have not laboured for the purity and power thereof; and that we have not endeavoured to receive Christ in our hearts, nor to walk worthy of Him in our lives, which are the causes of other sins and transgressions so much abounding amongst us ; and our true and unfeigned purpose, desire, and endeavour for ourselves, and all others under our power and charge, both in public and private, in all duties we owe to God and man, to amend our lives, and each one to go before another in the example of a real reformation: that the Lord may turn away His wrath and heavy indignation, and establish these churches and kingdoms in truth and peace. And this Covenant we make in the presence of Almighty God, the Searcher of all hearts, with a true intention to perform the same, as we shall answer at the great day, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed ; most humbly beseeching the Lord to strengthen us by the Holy Spirit for this end, and to bless our desires and proceedings with such success as may be deliverance and safety to His people, and encouragement to other Christian Churches, groaning under, or in danger of, the yoke of anti-Christian tyranny, to join the same or like association or covenant, to the glory of God, the enlargement of the kingdom of Jesus Christ, and the peace and tranquillity of Christian kingdoms and commonwealths.”

It is lamentable to reflect that the principles of this noble Covenant do not seem ever to have been carried out with general zeal and hearty thoroughness

in England. The Commonwealth came to an end in 1660, and the Stuart dynasty was unhappily restored to the throne. Charles II., who had subscribed the Covenant on two occasions, became a perfidious traitor to them, no sooner had he gained the crown. He pursued the same policy as his father, and exercised all his power to overturn the whole work of the Covenanted Reformation. The Acts Recissory were passed, in which the Covenants were annulled and declared treasonable and seditious articles.

Thus began the period of the 28 years' persecution. James II. succeeded Charles, and acted with greater severity than his predecessor. The Covenanters were hunted with dragoons on the moors of Scotland, and many of them endured most painful sufferings and died most cruel deaths for the sake of Christ's Crown and Covenant. At length, in the gracious providence of God, the Revolution came in 1688, when William and Mary, a Protestant king and queen, were set upon the throne, with the result that the persecutions were brought to an end, and an era of religious freedom dawned. The Presbyterian Church was established in Scotland and the Episcopal in England—not quite the ideal of the Covenanters.

The Covenants were not formally acknowledged again, and the Acts Recissory remained on the statute book of the realm. More than two hundred years have elapsed since that time, and still, we are nationally in the same, if not a worse, position. But a better day may yet dawn, when, under the outpouring of the Holy Spirit of God, these kingdoms will repent of their backslidings, and renew their solemn engagements with God, thus realising the fulfilment of the famous prediction of James Guthrie, the martyr, uttered on the scaffold, in immediate prospect of beholding the face of God and the Lamb, "The Covenants, the Covenants, will yet be Scotland's reviving."