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The Pre-Reformation Church

There are some who regard the pre-Reformation Church as 'an amiable and lovely maiden' with no spot on her beautiful vesture. They stand entranced as they contemplate the gorgeous services, the stately cathedrals, the altars solemnly railed off from the ordinary worshippers, the Mass, the incense, the well-ordered processions, and the sensuous music. They are greatly impressed by the high potentates of the Church, especially the pope. It all seems so awe-inspiring and so grand. The admirers of such an order of things do not wait to enquire how such elements entered the Church of Christ, or what authority there is for them. Did the apostles approve such forms of service and the characteristic doctrines of the Roman Church? Why are these services so gorgeous and sensuous while the apostolic Church, and the early Church generally, rejoiced in forms of service which were the very essence of simplicity? The Christian Church at the beginning deliberately chose these simple forms, not because the Church must be spiritual, and spirituality does not consist in piling up awe-inspiring rites and ceremonies, or in the multiplying of costly and splendid vestments. All these were well known in ancient times. The service in the Jewish

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temple was itself ornate, yet the apostles, led by the Holy Spirit, put that aside as having served its purpose in the Old Testament economy. They stressed the religion of the heart rather than outward trappings. If it is ritual for which we are looking we have a long way to go before we can equal the splendour and magnificence of the ancient pagan religions.

When the Church abandoned the ancient simplicity and introduced the endless paraphernalia which characterized medieval ecclesiasticism, did it lead to greater spirituality in the Church? Did men become more Christ-like? Did the high functionaries of the Church develop a character more like that of the apostles when they began claiming so loudly to be *apostolic*? Did the grave departures from the doctrines and practices of the primitive Church produce the fruits of righteousness or did not the Church rather fall into iniquitous practices utterly unworthy of the Christian faith?

For generations before the Reformation, loud cries had been going up from Church Councils and other ecclesiastical gatherings demanding reform of the flagrant abuses which were bringing same upon the Christian cause. The tragedy of the situation, however, was that the members of the Church Councils themselves were the worst offenders. In spite of all that art and wealth could do, the moral condition of the Church remained deplorable in the extreme. Although 'long drawn aisles and fretted vaults' were beautiful to look upon, and 'pealing anthems' swelled 'the note of praise', and grandeur of all kinds surrounded religious rites, yet the Church's spiritual life was feeble in the extreme. Never were beauty and art so much used in the service of the Church; seldom has the moral life of its members been so low.

The situation in Scotland was similar to that in the rest of Europe. The scathing words of John Colet, Dean of St Paul's, to

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the prelates and priests in his famous sermon to Convocation in 1512 could be applied equally well to Scotland. He declared that reform must begin with the bishops, and that once begun, it would spread to the clergy and thence to the laity; 'for the body follows the soul; and as are the rulers in a State, such will the people be'. He then proceeded to deal in scathing terms with the flagrant abuses which prevailed.[1] To understand the sad conditions of the Church in Scotland, then, we cannot do better than consider the evidence of Roman Catholic writers and the findings of Roman Catholic Councils. They cannot be accused of prejudice against their own faith.

Ignorance and Inefficiency

In 1552 a Catechism was prepared by order of Archbishop John Hamilton with the praiseworthy object of instructing the people in the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Sacraments, and the Lord's Prayer. It was issued 'with the advice and counsel of the bishops and other prelates' in the Provincial Council at Edinburgh. It was recognized 'that the inferior clergy of this realm, and the prelates, have not, for the most part, attained such proficiency in the knowledge of the Holy Scriptures as to be able, by their own efforts, rightly to instruct the people in the Catholic faith and other things necessary to salvation, or to convert the erring'.[2] It was ordered that the book be regularly read by vicars and curates, 'vested in surplice and stole', on all Sundays and holy days, and the statute then continued: 'The said rectors, vicars, or curates must ... prepare themselves with all zeal and assiduity for the task of reading (in public), by constant, frequent, and daily rehearsal of the lesson to be read,

1. T.M. Lindsay, *The Reformation*, 1, pp. 165 ff.
2. David Patrick, *Statutes of the Scottish Church*, pp. 143, 144.

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lest they expose themselves to the ridicule of their hearers, when, through want of preparation, they stammer and stumble in mid-course of reading.[3] This emphatic instruction from the Provincial Council of 1552 shows that many having pastoral charges were bordering on illiteracy. The proceedings of the same Council, seven years later, show that no improvement had taken place. There was ample ground, therefore, for the taunt of the jerring rhymester who wrote:

'The curate his creid he culd nocht reid.'

The Provincial Council of 1549 had declared that many curates were 'very deficient, as well in learning, morals, and discretion.'[4] It is not surprising that at that time the clergy were held in derision. According to George Buchanan many of them were so ignorant of the Scriptures that they believed the *New* Testament was a recent book written by Martin Luther, and declared they would adhere to the *Old* and have nothing to do with the New.[5] When that eminently pious and cultured man, Thomas Forret, Canon of Inchcolm and Vicar of Dollar (often called Dean Thomas), was reprimanded by Bishop Crichton of Dunkeld for preaching 'the Epistle or Gospel every Sunday to his parishioners' because he might make the people think that the bishops should preach likewise, he was advised to preach only when he found 'any good Epistle, or any good Gospel'! When Forret declared that he could find no evil Epistle or evil Gospel, and asked the Bishop to declare which were good and which evil, the latter vehemently replied, 'I thank God that *I never knew what the Old and New Testament was*. Therefore,

3. David Patrick, *Statutes of the Scottish Church*, p. 146
4. *Op. cit.*, p. 110.
5. George Buchanan, *History of Scotland*, p. 219.

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Dean Thomas, I will know nothing but my portuise and pontifical'.[6] At Forret's trial, the public prosecutor pulled a New Testament out of his sleeve and shouted, 'Behold, he has the book of heresy in his sleeve, which makes all the confusion in the Kirk.' Explanations and expostulations were in vain, and this most attractive character was burnt on the Castlehill of Edinburgh, on 1 March 1539. Four other godly men were burnt in the same place that same day.

Nowhere was the ignorance of the clergy more scathingly denounced than in the *Panegyricus* addressed by Archibald Hay, a cultured priest, to his kinsman, David Beaton, when he became Archbishop of St Andrews and Primate of all Scotland. He wrote: 'I declare, as I desire God's love, that I am ashamed to review the lives of the common and even of certain other priests, obscured all round with the darkness of ignorance, so that I often wonder what the bishops were thinking of when they admitted such men to the handling of the Lord's body, when they hardly knew the order of the alphabet. Priests come to that heavenly table who have not slept off yesterday's debauch ... '[7]

Preaching

For nearly a thousand years preaching had almost vanished from the Church of Rome, its place being taken by the various rites and ceremonies which had been gradually introduced, especially the Mass, in which the priest professed to offer up anew in sacrifice the very body and blood of the Lord Jesus. The altar thus became an object of great veneration, and the man who ministered there and claimed to have the power of

6. Thomas McCrie, *Sketches of Scottish Church History*, pp. 16, 17; Calderwood, *History*, I, pp. 126, 127. Portuise = breviary; Pontifical = a book containing the rites.

7. *Ad. D. Davidem Betoun Card. Panegyricus*, fol. XXXIV. Trans. in D. Hay Fleming, *Reformation in Scotland*, p. 42.

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turning the bread and wine into the very body and blood of our Lord became of indescribable importance. Through his ministration of sacramental mysteries the grace of God was supposed to come to sinful and needy men, and did not come in any other way. The rites performed by the officiating priest were all that mattered and the proper place of preaching in the Church was lost sight of.

Although the rise in the thirteenth century of the mendicant preaching friars, the Franciscans and Dominicans, made a difference in certain places, yet before the Reformation degeneracy set in even with them, and in Scotland as elsewhere preaching was generally given a very minor place indeed. Again and again Provincial Councils in Scotland had given injunctions to the clergy to preach, but in vain. Not one of the bishops *could* preach in the time immediately before the Reformation, but, in view of the success attending Protestant preaching, the bishops were instructed to emulate them. At Ayr, Gavin Dunbar, Bishop of Glasgow, tried to do so. It proved a fiasco, for he had uttered only a few sentences when he had to apologize to his audience saying, 'They say that we should preach: why not? Better late thrive than never thrive. Have us still for your bishop, and we shall provide better for the next time.'[8] The bishop had desired to counter the preaching of George Wishart in Ayr. Instead, he hastily left the town, and did not attempt to preach there again. The attitude of the pre-Reformation Church in this matter was certainly not that of the Church of the apostles.[9] It ought to be recorded, however, that the good Bishop James Kennedy of St Andrews, who died in 1465, was a notable exception in this respect.

8. John Knox, *History*, 1, p.61.
9. Cf. 1 Corinthians 1:18, 21.

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Irreverence

One might have expected that, in a Church which aimed at making its rites deeply impressive and cultivated magnificent display, one would have found a holy reverence in every place of worship. This was far from being the case. On 1 February 1552 Parliament passed an Act against those who 'made perturbation in the kirk in time of divine service' preventing the Word of God from being heard. They would 'not desist therefore for any monition' of the churchmen. That same year Archbishop Hamilton's Catechism referred to 'the common sin of quarrelling and wanton singing in the kirk on Sunday', and to those who occupied themselves 'in vain, evil, or worldly talking, laughing and scorning'.[10]

This irreverence was well exemplified in connection with the mystery or miracle plays which for generations were a feature of ecclesiastical life. What Sir Walter Scott wrote in a note to *The Abbot* shows the scandalous pass to which the situation had come. He described how the laity (who had been encouraged in their evil course by the clergy) used to elect some 'lord of the revels, who under the name of the Abbot of Unreason, the Boy Bishop, or the President of Fools, occupied the churches, profaned the holy places by a mock imitation of the sacred rites and sang indecent parodies on hymns of the Church'. Sir Walter, who was an authority on medieval institutions, both ecclesiastical and civil, marvelled at the indifference of the clergy to these indecent exhibitions and coarse humour.[11] The profanity became so blasphemous that Parliament had to impose stern penalties.

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10. T.G. Law's edition of Hamilton's *Catechism*, pp. 68, 69.
11. Sir Walter Scott, *The Abbot*, note E.

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Low Clerical Morality

The most distressing feature of all in the pre-Reformation Church was the appallingly low state of morals among the clergy, who were all pledged to lives of celibacy. A witness of unimpeachable authority is Father Archibald Hay (afterwards Principal of St Mary's College, St Andrews) already referred to. In his long *Panegryicus* to Cardinal Beaton he wrote: 'If I proceeded to review the inordinate desire of glory, the incredible cruelty, passion, envy, hate, treachery, the insatiable longing for vengeance, the wicked words and disgraceful actions, all of which rage in the breasts of the churchmen, no one would believed that monsters so savage lurked under a human countenance. I will not treat of the riotous living of those who, professing chastity, have invented new kinds of lusts, which I prefer to be left unknown rather than be told by me.'[12] There is no indication that the cardinal did anything to improve the situation. He could scarcely do so, for in spite of his exalted ecclesiastical position, he was himself a notoriously immoral man. Anyone can verify this by looking up the entries in the Register of the Great Seal of Scotland, 1513 to 1546. There they will find the records of the legitimization of eleven of the Cardinal's bastard sons and three daughters. The father of these is very clearly designated as 'David, Cardinal priest of the Roman Church, Archbishop of St Andrews, Primate of Scotland,' and so on. No one seems to have seen the incongruity of a 'celibate' priest being the father of so numerous a family, as many as twenty according to some authorities. Certain of them married into the highest families in the land, the daughters receiving princely dowries. All this is astonishing when we

12. Archibald Hay, *Panegyricus*, fol. XLIII, quoted by D. Hay Fleming, *Reformation in Scotland*, pp. 42-45.

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remember that married priests were rigorously condemned, sometimes even to death, as in the case of Norman Gourlay at Edinburgh in 1534.

That the cardinal was not the only offender against sound morals in the Church is proved by the findings of the Provincial Council at Edinburgh in 1549. This gathering of prelates and priests presided over by John Hamilton, who succeeded Beaton as Archbishop of St Andrews and Primate of Scotland, acknowledged that 'the great dissensions and occasions of heresies' were caused principally by 'the corruption of morals and profane lewdness of life in churchmen of almost all ranks, together with the crass ignorance of literature and of all the liberal arts.'[13] Let it be remembered that these are not the words of an over-zealous Protestant, but of a solemn Provincial Council of the Roman Church. This 'Holy Synod and Provincial Council' resolved 'to apply remedies and put a check on these mischiefs, so far as it can adequately to the exigency of the times'. The Council fulminated against the keeping of concubines by churchmen and ordered the prelates and 'their subordinate clergy' not to suffer their offspring 'to be promoted in their churches, nor ... to marry their daughters to barons, or make their son barons out of the patrimony of Christ'.[14] These customs had become a veritable scandal, but the findings of the Council were futile. Although Archbishop Hamilton, who presided, was described as 'the venerable and most reverend father in Christ, and lord ... Primate of the whole realm of Scotland' he had as evil a record in regard to morality as his predecessor, Cardinal Beaton. Of the six bishops who attended, three were notoriously licentious, and there is no

13. David Patrick, *Statutes of the Scottish Church*, p. 84.

14. David Patrick, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

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reason to believe that the lesser clergy were any better. The result was that the findings of the Council as to morality were disregarded.

Patronage

The vile system of patronage which had existed for three centuries did much to ruin the pre-Reformation Church. The pope, the king, the nobles and, in certain cases within their dioceses, the bishops all claimed the right to make appointments to benefices. The pope claimed the lion's share and caused intense discontent. In spite of interventions by Parliament (particularly in 1496), he went on making appointments to bishoprics and abbacies and to many vacant benefices, always in return for large money payments. There were sore complaints that the Vatican was draining the country of its financial resources.[15]

The patrons, of all kinds, often appointed most unsuitable persons. Frequently they were not ordained and were quite unfitted in character, and it was common for babes to be appointed. The manner in which James V secured the highest ecclesiastical offices for his infant illegitimate children shows how the evil system worked. Six of these children, some at the age of six, some at the age of seven, were appointed to certain of the richest ecclesiastical posts in Scotland from which enormous revenues were derived. Thus, James (the elder) became Commendator of the great abbey of Kelso in 1535 when aged six, and in 1541 was also made Abbot of Melrose. Few nobles in the land had such an income as this infant.

Abbacies and priories were given in commendam, i.e. in trust. The commendator was often a man of the world with no interest whatever in the salvation of souls. He drew the greater part of

15. *Acts of Parliament of Scotland* (year 1496), II, p. 238.

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the rich revenues, and appointed some second-rate clergyman at a miserable pittance to do the spiritual work. It is not surprising that it was often badly done. Closely allied with this abuse was the system of pluralities whereby a man (quite frequently a layman) could hold a number of lucrative ecclesiastical offices for which he did no work. Professor John Cunningham well described this dreadful system: 'The great dignitaries of the Church set the example, and beside their bishoprics, held abbacies, priories, and parishes, for the sake of their revenues. Archbishop Forman and Cardinal Beaton were notorious for this. Everyone grasped as many livings as he could; and if the teinds were got hold of there was little thought for the cure of souls.'[16]

The same glaring evil existed in regard to monasteries. Very often the religious houses possessed anything from twenty-five to over thirty parishes with the teinds, rights of patronage, and other sources of revenue. These religious houses took the revenues and appointed a vicar in each parish to do the work at a wretched salary. These men were to be pitied. They were in poverty and the whole status of the parish priests was lowered, while the income and ecclesiastical dues 'went to fatten the useless inmates of some distant monastery'.[17] Some of the ablest and staunchest Roman Catholic historians have emphatically condemned these abuses connected with appointments to benefices. They recognize that they had a disastrous effect upon the Church.

The facts briefly referred to in this chapter give some idea as to how desperately reform was needed, and show also how lamentably the Roman Church had failed to institute any adequate reform. Men like Luther, Calvin and Knox had to arise before a real Reformation could be produced.

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16. John Cunningham, *Church History of Scotland*, 1, p. 205.
17. *Op. cit.*, p.205

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