

GEORGE WISHART

MARTYRED

1546

GEORGE WISHART, a Scottish religious reformer, converted John Knox when Knox was a Roman Catholic priest. In 1543, Wishart taught at Cambridge University. He was a tall, plain-dressed man, polite and humble, well-traveled, personable, generous to the poor and stingy to himself, who loved to teach and loved God above all things. He ate only two meals a day, fasted one day out of four, and slept on a straw mattress and coarse new canvas sheets, which he gave away whenever he changed them.

Because Wishart was quite serious in his teachings of the Scriptures, some people thought he was a severe person, some even disliking what he taught enough to kill him. The Lord, however, was his defense, and usually after he talked with them about their malice and exhorted them to better ways, they were well-pleased with him, and with themselves. Not pleased with him, however, because of his Reformation doctrines, was the Roman Catholic clergy, and they were soon to have their way with him.

In 1544, Wishart increasingly desired to preach the true gospel in his own country, and so he left Cambridge and returned to Scotland. He began teaching in Montrose, then Dundee, and throughout the land. His main theme as he taught was the meaning of Paul’s epistle to the Romans and justification by faith as rediscovered by Martin Luther about thirty years before, and he did it with such grace and freedom that the papists were greatly alarmed.

Over the next two years as Wishart journeyed, he nearly lost his life several times as the Romish clergy tried to silence him. Once when he was in west Scotland he heard that a plague had broken out in Dundee, so he hurried there to minister to the sick in body and soul. He was received with joy.

Before he left Dundee to return to Montrose, a popish priest named John Weighton was incited by David Beaton, the archbishop and Cardinal of Scotland, to kill him. According to the story, Weighton hid a dagger under his gown and waited at

the bottom of the pulpit stairs for Wishart to come down after he finished a sermon about healing of the soul and body. Wishart, however, saw the priest waiting for him with his hand inside his gown and said to him, “My friend, what is it you want?” and grabbed the dagger and took it from the priest as he tried to free it from his gown. The now terrified priest fell to his knees, confessed his intention, and begged Wishart’s forgiveness.

Several of the sick who had lingered outside the fence that separated them from those who were well, saw and heard what happened and demanded that the traitor be turned over to them. In their anger they broke through the fence and would have taken the priest, but Wishart held him in his arms and said, “Whoever hurts him shall hurt me, for he has not harmed me, but has done me much good by teaching me to be more watchful in the future.” By this action he calmed the people and saved the life of the evil priest who had tried to kill him.

Soon after Wishart returned to Montrose, Cardinal Beaton had a false letter sent to him as if it were from a well-known friend who owned the Kennier land and estate, asking him to come immediately because he was deathly sick. Along the route to the estate, about a mile and a half from Montrose, Beaton set an ambush of sixty armed men to murder Wishart. But as Wishart and some close companions approached the area, he received a sudden thought that all was not well and he should not continue on his journey. To his companions he said, “God has forbidden me to continue. There is treason ahead. Some of you continue carefully and let me know what you find.” When they discovered the ambush set by the cardinal, they returned quickly to Wishart and told him. Wishart said, “I know my life will end at the hands of that bloodthirsty man, but not by being ambushed.”

Not long after, in 1546, Cardinal Beaton was told that Wishart was staying with a Mr. Cockburn of Ormiston, in East Lothian in southern Scotland, and asked the governor of that region to take Wishart into custody, which he did but much against his will. Wishart was then taken to Edinburgh and imprisoned in St. Andrews castle.

From there he was summoned to appear the next morning before the Cardinal of St. Andrews and his

council of bishops on charges of teaching seditious and heretical doctrine. In the morning, the cardinal had one-hundred of his servants dress in battle array as if they were preparing for war rather than escorting someone being tried for preaching the true Word of God. From St. Andrews they marched George Wishart to the Abbey Church in warlike ranks, afraid that the people who so admired and loved Wishart would try to take him by force, or that he would try to escape, but he followed them meekly to the monastery church. At the door, he paused briefly to toss his purse of money to a poor sick man lying on the steps.

When he came inside the church and stood before the cardinal, the sub-prior of the Abbey, named Dane John Winryme, went into the pulpit and gave a sermon on heresy. When he finished, an amply fed priest named John Lander read a lengthy roll of eighteen charges of heresy against Wishart. The charges were filled with curses, blasphemies, and threats, which Lander read with increased rage until sweat ran down his face and he foamed at the mouth and spit out his words. When he finished, he shouted at Wishart, “What do you answer to these charges, you renegade, you traitor, you thief! We have proved them by sufficient witness against you!”

Wishart first knelt and prayed, and then, gently and Christ-like, said, “It is only right that you who are judging me should know what my words and doctrines are and what I have taught, so that I don’t die unjustly to the great peril of your souls. Therefore, for the glory and honor of God, for your own well-being, and for the protection of my life, I earnestly request you judges hear me, and I will tell you my doctrines without changing them.”

At that, the accusing priest, Lander, screamed, “You heretic, renegade, traitor, and thief! It is not lawful for you to preach. You have taken that power into your own hands without any authority from the church.”

The assembled prelates exclaimed, “If we allow him to preach here, he is so crafty and knowledgeable of the Scriptures that he’ll turn the people against us.”

Wishart, seeing what they were planning, asked to appeal his case to the lord governor, since he was

James Beaton, the archbishop of St. Andrews, who was an adamant Roman Catholic, heard of Hamilton’s teachings and summoned him to appear before him, which Hamilton did without delay, thinking he would have an opportunity to dispute papist doctrine. But after only a short examination, the archbishop had him arrested and held in the most loathsome part of St. Andrews castle until the next morning, when he was taken before a council of bishops for further examination as a heretic.

The charges read against him were that he had publicly disapproved of pilgrimages, purgatory, prayers to saints, prayers for the dead, the mass, and had denied the infallibility of the pope. Hamilton agreed that all the charges were correct. For this he was immediately condemned to be burned alive, and on the order of the bigoted archbishop the sentence was to be carried out that very afternoon.

When Hamilton was taken to a place of burning only a day after he had willingly met with the archbishop, the crowd that gathered did not believe they were actually going to burn him, but thought it was part of his examination to frighten him into recanting his beliefs and returning to the Romish doctrines. But they soon learned they were mistaken.

When they brought Hamilton to the stake, he knelt down and prayed fervently for some time. He was then chained to the stake and bundles of twigs, sticks and tree limbs were piled around him. A bag of gunpowder was then placed in each armpit and set on fire. These did not explode, but only scorched his arms and face, neither did they set the sticks on fire. Some dry kindling and more gunpowder was brought and lit. Again, it did not explode, but did ignite and fire quickly flamed up around Hamilton.

As the flames engulfed him, he cried out, “Lord Jesus, how long will darkness overwhelm this realm? And how long will you allow the tyranny of these men?” Apparently, however, the bundles of limbs and sticks were green, and after the initial fire died down they burned slowly and caused him great anguish. Yet he bore the suffering with such Christian courage that it was obvious to all the true believers who were watching that the grace of God was much with him in his martyrdom. He died with the words, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” on his lips. The year was 1527.☞

arrested by him in the first place and should be judged by his legal authorities, not the church.

Despite his appeal, eighteen articles of heresy were read against Wishart, each of which he answered with Scripture that soundly supported his doctrine. When the bishops were through, they condemned him to be executed as a heretic by hanging and burning, ignoring all his replies, and told the congregation to leave.

On the morning of his execution, the cardinal sent two friars to him in prison. They put a black linen coat on him and tied several bags of gunpowder to various parts of his body. Then they tied his arms behind his back, secured an iron chain around his waist, and led him to the stake by a rope around his neck. To prevent any of Wishart’s many friends and admirers from interfering with the execution, Cardinal Beaton had his gunners stand ready at their guns until Wishart was burned and dead.

At the stake he fell to his knees and three times prayed, “O Thou Savior of the world, have mercy on me. Father of heaven, I commend my spirit into Thy holy hands.” Then he prayed for his accusers, saying, “I beseech Thee, Father of heaven, forgive them that have lied against me. I forgive them with all my heart. I ask Christ to forgive them that out of ignorance have condemned me.” Then he turned to the people gathered there and said, “For the Word’s sake and the true gospel, which was given to me by the grace of God, I will suffer this day at the hands of men; not sorrowfully, but with a glad heart. For this cause I was sent, that I should suffer this fire for Christ’s sake. Watch my face closely. You will not see me change color, for I do not fear this grim fire. I know surely that my soul shall dine this night with my Savior Christ.”

Upon hearing this, the hangman knelt before Wishart and said, “Sir, please forgive me, for I am not guilty of your death.” Wishart replied, “Come here to me.” When he did, Wishart kissed him on the cheek and said, “This is proof that I forgive you, my beloved. Do your work.”

Wishart was then hung on the gallows over the fire until his body burned to ashes. When the people saw his great torment, they could not keep from weeping for him, and accusing the papists of slaughtering an innocent lamb.✠

WALTER MILL MARTYRED 1558

WALTER MILL, a Scottish priest of many years, finally, on a trip to Germany, heard the true gospel of Christ. Upon returning to Scotland, he set aside all things about the Roman Catholic Church and began to teach Reformation doctrine. Not long after, he was apprehended by two Catholic priests and taken to St. Andrews castle in Edinburgh. Walter Mill was eighty-two years old.

At first Mill was threatened with torture and burning, but when this did not convince him to recant his beliefs, he was offered a monk’s position and lifetime security in the Abbey of Dunfermline if he would deny what he had taught, agreeing that it was heresy. But he continued to maintain the truth of the gospel despite their threats and enticing promises.

He was then taken to St. Andrews church and put into the pulpit to be accused before the bishops. Because of age and his treatment in prison, Mill was unable to climb the pulpit stairs without help, and the bishops thought he would be too weak to speak loud enough for them to hear him. But when he spoke, his voice rang out with such courage and boldness that the Christians who were present rejoiced while his adversaries were confused and ashamed.

The examination proceeded in its expected direction, and at the end a priest, Andrew Oliphant, asked Mill if he would recant his erroneous opinions. He answered, “I would rather forfeit ten-thousand lives than give up a particle of the heavenly principles that I’ve received from the sufferings of my blessed Redeemer.” Oliphant then pronounced sentence upon him and he was conducted back to prison for execution the next day. When he was taken to the place of execution, Walter Mill expressed his faith in Christ so strongly and with such keenness of mind for his age and weak condition, that it astonished even his enemies. After prayer, he said to all,

Dear friends, the reason why I am to suffer this day is not because I have committed any crimes, although I consider myself a most miserable sinner before God, but it is for the defense of the faith of Jesus Christ. It is that faith for which godly martyrs have offered

themselves gladly before. So this day I praise God that He has called me to be among those servants, and seal up His truth with my life, which I received from Him and willingly offer it back to Him for His glory. Do not be seduced by the lies of priests, monks, friars, priors, abbots, bishops, and the rest of the sect of Antichrist. Depend only upon Jesus Christ and His mercy to save you.

While he was speaking there was great crying and mourning among the people, for they were stirred by his courage and boldness, his steadfastness and faith, and his words inflamed their hearts. Walter Mill was then hung on a stake and his body burned to ashes, and he went safely home to be with his Lord forever in glory. When the Reformation fully came upon Scotland in 1560, and the Scottish Parliament established Presbyterianism as the national faith, many costly images from Catholic churches were burned on the site of Walter Mill’s martyrdom.✠

“And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death” (Rev 12:11)

These stories are actual and historical accounts of Christian suffering taken from the famous ***Foxe’s Book of Martyrs***. Born in 1516, John Foxe of England, professor of Oxford University, wrote his book to document the persecution against Christ’s Church by pagans and by those who called themselves Christians but were not. It’s a book about God’s grace and Christian faithfulness. First published in English in 1563, Foxe’s book has endured for over four-hundred years as a memorial to the martyrs, and a legacy of inspiration and courage to the true Church of Jesus Christ.

Before he died in 1587, Foxe had the joy of seeing four large editions of his book published. The Council of Bishops ordered it placed in every cathedral church in England, and like the Bible, it was often chained to the pulpit.

Eventually there came a time, not only in England, but all over the English-speaking world, when a home wasn’t considered to be Christian unless it openly displayed a Bible and ***Foxe’s Book of Martyrs***. Years later, John Bunyan’s ***Pilgrim’s Progress***, published in 1678, had the honor of being included with those two books as basic and essential Christian reading.✠

3 SCOTTISH MARTYRS

“And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus” (Rev 17:6)

PATRICK HAMILTON MARTYRED 1527

PATRICK HAMILTON, a young Scotsman, was one of many who were strongly affected by the soundness of Reformation doctrine. Martin Luther’s teachings and controversy with the Roman Catholic Church had far-reaching results throughout Europe, Great Britain, and other places. It stirred up the hearts of many and sent them searching for the truth of God’s Word.

To learn more of the Scriptures, Patrick Hamilton and three companions attended the University of Marburg in west-central Germany, north of Frankfurt. It was Europe’s first Protestant university and was founded by Prince Philip of Hesse. While there, Patrick and his companions became friends with Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon. The writings and teachings of Luther and Melancthon convinced Hamilton and his friends to leave the Roman Catholic Church and embrace the Protestant faith. The head of the university, one named Lambert, also had a strong influence upon Hamilton instructing him even more fully concerning the truths of Scripture.

Now inflamed with true knowledge of faith and godliness, Patrick Hamilton was anxious to return home and teach his countrymen the right ways of God and Christ as shown clearly in God’s Word. Taking with him his three companions, he arrived back in Scotland and began right away publicly addressing the people. His youth – he was only twenty-eight – his talent and his pleasant, gentle disposition made many churchmen try to change his mind, or at least convince him to stop preaching his beliefs and disturbing the Church. Hamilton held so firm that he converted a Catholic priest named Aless who later came to visit him in prison. In time, Aless suffered persecution for his new faith and was burned.