

John Foxe (1517-1587)

The Acts and Monuments of the Church

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Born at the birth of the Continental Reformation, one of the most illustrious figures in the English and Continental Reformation is that of John Foxe, the martyrologist. Few Reformers had his overall grasp of Biblical theology and church history and few were as all-round as he in applying Christian virtues to every sphere of everyday life.



Foxe was born in Boston, Lincolnshire in 1517, the very year that Luther nailed up his ninety-five theses to the door of Wittenberg's Schlosskirche. We know little of his family background apart from the fact that his father died when he was an infant and his mother soon remarried. Foxe was tutored by his step-father until he entered Brazenose College, Oxford at the age of sixteen. At this time, Foxe's room-mate was Alexander Nowel, who became Foxe's lifelong friend and fellow-exile under Mary the Bloody. Nowel was the first exile to return to England after Mary's death and put the Reformation back on a firm footing by his preaching at court and his famous catechism. But those days were far ahead. Meanwhile, Foxe took his BA in 1538 and received his MA in 1543, the year he was elected fellow of Magdalen College.

A SINCERELY WRONG PAPIST

During this time, Foxe was an ardent papist and absolute enemy of doctrines such as justification by faith and imputed righteousness. However, he was a highly moral person and kept himself from open sin but sadly thought that this effort would earn him God's love and saving grace. The fact that Foxe was an intensive student of the Scriptures and early church history was the means God used to open his eyes to gospel truths. He quickly found out that the Roman faith of his day had little to do with the gospel of the Bible and primitive Christianity. He therefore made a detailed study of the history of the growth of Romanism and its deviations from true Christianity. By the time he reached his thirtieth year, Foxe was an expert on Biblical languages, the Greek and Latin fathers, Roman scholasticism and the history and development of doctrine. All this caused him to openly profess the Reformed faith at a time when martyrs such as Tyndale and Frith were being made. Foxe was expelled from Oxford and told that he must consider himself happy not to be sentenced to death. This expulsion caused Foxe great financial difficulties as not only did his sponsors withdraw from him but his step-father, who held Foxe's estate

inherited from his father in trusteeship, refused to hand it over. He believed, according to Erasmus Middleton, that as his step-son was on the wrong side of the law, he could not take his step-father to court.

A DIVINE INTERVENTION

Now Foxe entered on one of his many periods of hunger and acute need which was relieved when Sir Thomas Lucy invited him to serve as private tutor for his children. This post was only temporary, however, and soon Foxe was in dire straits again, made more difficult as he had recently married. As so often in his life, Foxe was saved from dying of hunger by a most extraordinary incident. He was sitting one day in St. Paul's church, almost starved to death when an unknown person sat beside him. The stranger pressed a substantial amount of money into Foxe's hand and told him that he should not despair but strive to keep body and soul together during the next few days as the Lord had prepared better prospects and a means of livelihood for him. Sure enough, three days later, the Duchess of Richmond asked Foxe to tutor the children of her nephew, the Duke of Surrey. Foxe kept this post from the end of Henry VIII's reign until the reign of Mary. Although Foxe hunted high and low for his kind benefactor, he never found out who he was.

FORCED INTO AN EXILE AT FRANKFURT

The royal henchman, Stephen Gardiner, called the Bloody Bishop by friends of the Reformation, plotted to have Foxe arrested and imprisoned with the Reformation martyrs already in custody. The Duke of Norfolk, an ex-pupil of Foxe's, warned his former teacher, advising him to flee the country. Foxe thus left England with his expectant wife via Ipswich for the Continent but the ship was blown back to land by a terrible storm. On his return, Foxe learnt that Gardiner's spies were combing the harbours for him and persuaded the captain to put to sea again. The ship landed at Nieuport, Flanders two days later. From Belgium, Foxe and his wife journeyed to Frankfurt and joined the English church there. The Foxe family, however, were very unhappy at Frankfurt for four reasons. The first was that their new pastor designate, John Knox, a Scotsman, refused to pastor the church on what he thought were too English lines. Nor would he use Calvin's order when this was proposed by Foxe and several others. The second reason was that a group of young cantankerous rebels were spoiling the fellowship. Thirdly, Foxe badly needed a chance to earn money as he now had a wife and young son to keep and could find no employment in Frankfurt. Perhaps the fourth reason was the major one as Foxe was now working on his history of the martyrs, assisted by Bale, Grindal, Sampson and several other exiles. The Roman Catholic and Lutheran authorities in Germany were putting pressure on their printers not to handle Anglican works so, after signing a letter with seventeen other dissatisfied Englishmen at Frankfurt, Foxe travelled to Basle in Switzerland.

WORK AT BASLE

At Basle, two burdens fell from Foxe's shoulders, he found a good printer

and also work in the printing firm. However, the Precisian legalists who looked on the church as a rigorously ordered system rather than the community of the saints, followed the Reformers to Basle and continued their endless bickering. Foxe was to be plagued by such men of 'Jewish Bondage' for the rest of his days. It was at Basle, where historian John Bale, a man of like spirit, had joined him, that Foxe put together the first part of his Acts and Monuments.

A unique letter in English is extant from Foxe's pen. The Reformer was one of the very first English theologians to write in his mother tongue. This is made evident by the Parker Society's enormous collection of letters from the Reformers between 1558 and 1602 which boasts but one original English letter, that of Foxe. All the other correspondence during this period was in Latin. In this letter, we see a man who was living under most trying conditions but when writing to a sick friend in spiritual need could forget himself in a faithful effort to comfort another:

JOHN FOXE TO FRENHAM.

Dated at Basle June 27, 1558

Master Frensham. As you in your letters have oft comforted me, so I would I could likewise comfort you: but where my comfort is small, the Lord Jesus, the comforter of all, work in you sure consolation which may comfort both your body and soul! In whom I desire you be strong and valiant, so much as the weakness of your disease can bear. Be nothing discouraged, nor be not out of hope in yourself. I have seen here amongst our countrymen in the like disease greater weakness recover full well.

I desire you, in your contemplation of Christ, let your spirit be so noble and high in him, that ye may tread under your feet all other things, seem they never so strong, mighty, terrible, or great in this world; for he that hath overcome the world, what hath not he overcome in the world? Life or death, sickness or health, things present or to come, height or low, are nothing in Christ. Only, my brother, master Frensham, a hearty faith in Jesus Christ is all together whereby alonely we miserable and corruptible wretches are saved, do stand, do triumph, yea, in death and over death, in sin and over sin, and finally have victory over all evils, sin, death, hell, Satan, and all. For so it hath pleased the Father to save us by this faith only in his Son, to the end that we seeing his justice could not otherwise be satisfied but by his Son, we might the more fear him for his great righteousness, and love him for his great mercy, being saved by this faith in his Son. To this all the scripture beareth witness. The Lord Jesus stir up the quickening and feeling of this faith in our dull senses! To will you this in my prayer as I do not cease, so I do not despair of your recovery altogether: the mighty Lord Jesus, if it be his pleasure, put to his helping hand in restoring your health again! His good will be done. The bottle ye sent is not yet come to me Basileae, June 27.

Tuus in Christo,

J. Foxe

THE RETURN OF THE EXILES

In November, 1558, whilst Foxe was preaching to the exiles in Basle, he surprised everyone by saying that they must now return to England and set up the Reformation again because on the following day, Mary would go to meet her heavenly judge. After the service, many rebuked Foxe for his 'enthusiasm' and told him that he ought to be ashamed of himself, giving them all such false hopes. On the following day, Mary died, though it took some time for the news to reach Switzerland. When the news arrived, everybody wondered how Foxe could have known about it as it was humanly impossible for him to have even received news that the Queen was dying. A return to England was not at all a tempting thought to many of the Reformers. Many of them had now settled down on the Continent and had no wish to return to England and an uncertain future. Foxe, Nowel, Jewel and Grindal urged the English to return as soon as possible and did all in their powers to move the exiles back to England. Many, like Foxe, were almost penniless so sponsors had to be appealed to in England for funds. Foxe wrote to his old pupils, outlining their plight and the Duke of Norfolk and the Earl of Surrey, amongst others, came to the exiles' rescue. Once back in England, Foxe found a temporary home at the Duke's Christ Church manor. Though Foxe had to leave the Duke's house after his death his successor gave him a small pension. Foxe, however, could not keep a penny when he knew that others were suffering and so he ate very frugally and wore the same clothes year in and year out so that he could give more to the poor. Indeed, he often made others better off than he was himself.

FOXES THE NONCONFORMIST

Lord Cecil, whom the papists claimed was the key man of the Reformation, took a special liking to Foxe and granted him preferment after preferment but Foxe never changed his simple way of life. This love of frugality was also shown in Foxe's abhorrence of vestments and church trimmings. So great was the respect for Foxe amongst the most earnest of England's Reformers including the Archbishop and Queen, that he was permitted to retain his status and Prebendary until his death, in spite of his nonconformity. Foxe saw little use whatsoever for set forms of discipline and order which transformed the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ into a legal body. When Archbishop Parker asked him to sign a declaration of his allegiance to the Church of England, her Articles and traditions, Foxe took out his Greek New Testament and said that he would only sign to that. Again, Parker left his friend Foxe in peace. At this, the Precisian and Presbyterian faction claimed Foxe as their own but the Reformer would not have anything to do with their formalism either. He could not agree with their rigid views of church government which were basically papist as they taught that there was no true church outside of their system of externals. Indeed, apart from the persecution Foxe received under the papists, it was

the self-styled Puritans, who were so by name but not by true nature, who also played Rome's part and persecuted Foxe and his family. Of them Foxe said to a bishop friend:

I cannot but wonder, at that turbulent genius, which inspires those factious Puritans. – Were I one who, like them, would be violently outrageous against bishops and archbishops; or join myself with them, i.e. become mad, as they are; I had not met with severe treatment. But because, quite different from them, I have chosen the side of modesty and public tranquillity; the hatred which they have long conceived against me is at last grown to this degree of bitterness. – Your prudence is not ignorant how much the Christian religion suffered formerly by the dissimulation and hypocrisy of the monks. At present, in these men, I know not what new sort of monks seems to revive; so much more pernicious than the former, as, with more subtle artifices of deceiving, and under pretence of perfection, like stage-players, who can only act a part, they conceal a more dangerous poison: Who, while they require everything to be formed according to their own strict discipline, will not desist, until they have brought all things into Jewish bondage.¹

It is a sober thought that the Precisians and Presbyterians of Foxe's age, are thought by present Presbyterians to embody all the virtues of Nonconformity. Actually it was consequent Nonconformists such as John Foxe and Lawrence Humphreys who received most criticism from the Presbyterians because these stalwarts saw clearly that any rigid external structure such as that proposed by the Presbyterians was old Rome in new dress. In this view, they were joined by the vast bulk of England's Reformers, most of whom were Nonconformists of varying shades but neither Precisians nor Presbyterians. Foxe was convinced that the more church order and discipline were regulated, the less became the spirit of worship and a seeking of the Holy Spirit.

FOXES GREAT TOLERANCE

As expected from one who was suspicious of any praise of order over spiritual fellowship, Foxe was totally opposed to either State or Church demanding the death penalty for those who could not accept church canons from what quarter whatsoever. One Smithfield was enough, claimed Fuller, without Protestants imitating the savagery of papists. Thus Foxe protested strenuously against the execution of two Dutch Anabaptists in 1575, who were condemned to death by the Privy Council because they believed in salvation by works, and sinless perfection, and disbelieved in justification by faith and the eternal perseverance of the saints. Foxe wrote a long letter to the Queen arguing that to punish those with deadly fire who err from spiritual blindness rather than obstinacy of will was cruel, inhuman and unchristian. Life imprisonment or banishment would be suitable at worst but forgiveness and freedom would serve them best. He argued manfully that their death would not serve anyone. The Queen turned a deaf ear to 'her father Fox', thinking that to allow blasphemers liberty would be to

dishonour God.

FOXES 'SEVENTH SENSE'

Foxe's ability to discern the will of the Lord and apparently foretell what was to happen has given rise to many anecdotes concerning the Reformer. One of the most memorable is a visit he paid to a Mrs Honeywood which was discussed all over England. Mrs Honeywood was sixty years of age and had kept to her bed in a consumptive state for the last twenty years. Though the lady longed with all her heart for salvation, she felt she was doomed to hell and lived in total despair. At last, Foxe was sent for, so he visited her and her entire family, all who shared her gloom. Foxe prayed with the lady and outlined God's plan of salvation to her but she was not enabled to apply it to her heart. Suddenly, Foxe said to her in a commanding voice, 'You will not only recover from your bodily disease, but also live to an exceeding great age; and, which is yet better, you are interested in Christ, and will go to heaven when you die.' The woman appeared quite shocked and, after a moment's hesitation, cried, 'Impossible! I shall as surely be damned as this glass will break.' She then dashed a fine Venetian glass which she was holding in her hand with all her strength against the wall. The glass hit the wall, fell onto a solid wooden chest and then bounced off, striking the floor. The glass landed in one piece without so much as a crack in it or chip off it. The good lady recovered the good health of her youth and, after a further spiritual struggle, came to a saving knowledge of Christ and died in her ninety-third year.

FOXES THE EXEGETE

Though Foxe is still relatively well-known for his Acts and Monuments, usually called his Book of Martyrs, he was also a fine preacher, theologian and exegete. His theological works are as devotional as they are scholarly and the years have not rendered his language, where they were written in English, in the least difficult to follow. Much of Foxe's theology is clearly outlined in his writings against the Portuguese Roman Bishop Jerome Osorius² when he took up the cloak of Walter Haddon in defending the orthodox faith against Osorius' novelties. Here Foxe writes against free-will and extols God's predestination, election and justification of sinners. Though these works were aimed against Rome, much Protestant theology has drifted Rome-wards in our modern age and Foxe's arguments are of equal power today against Arminianism, Fullerism, Amyraldianism and many other 'isms' that now pervert the gospel amongst professing Reformed people.

Perhaps the greatest of Foxe's writings are the most neglected. These are his writings against Roman error regarding the marks of a church including its nature and ministry. Our present generation is rapidly going back Rome-wards whether it be in an Anglican, Presbyterian, Independent or Baptist form. Our denominations are, in reality, papist with a different name. Those who profess to be 'the true church' the loudest and are the most fervent outwardly against Rome, appear to this author to be inwardly her

dearest sister. Foxe had a view of the inner spirit of the true church, freed from the hard shells with which our modern denominationalism clothe it, indeed, smother it. He would be shocked today at the ignorance of those thousands of street corner split-offs who claim that their miserable denomination is ipso facto the Bride of Christ. Such call those on the other three street corners hell-bound because they, say, have a plurality of elders instead of an elder-teacher, dip backwards in baptism rather than forwards or use good old fashioned wine instead of coloured, non-alcoholic chemicals with artificial fruit taste and colour for the Lord's Supper. Where are the Christian publishing houses who are man enough to republish Foxe on the Church? What 'Christian' church today with her free offer piffle of a take it or leave it 'decision for Christ' dare say, 'Election is the free mercy and grace of God in his own will, through faith in Christ his Son, choosing and preferring to life such as pleases Him.'? Or how about, 'The mercy and grace of God ... excludeth all the works of the law, and merits of deserving, whether they go before faith, or come after'? Concerning those who are mesmerised by denominationalism into thinking that their little club of legalists is the true church, Foxe tells them 'I know that there is never a church which is not visible in the earth. But it does not follow because a church is visible that on that account it is the church of Christ; what it does should be the criterion.'

FLOWN HOME

Brave, honest, humble Foxe who had foretold Mary's death and had said from the pulpit that the Armada would come and would be defeated, also foretold his own death. He lived so near to God that he did not mistake His call. Unlike the evil woman, and the fleet who served the same wicked cause, Foxe was ready for death and went willingly on 18 April, 1587. He loved his two sons dearly and we read that they grew strong in the faith, but Foxe could not bear their fussiness and over-care which prevented him from communing with God. Thus, when the call home came, Foxe sent off his sons on some business or other and then, as one biographer puts it, he was flown to heaven. May our prayer be to serve our Saviour as faithfully as Foxe, and then, like he was, we shall ever be ready to be flown to heaven.

- i. The complete letter in Latin is in Fuller's Church History, IX Book, pp. 806-807 (Separate Section 106-7).
- ii. Originally published in Latin (1565) as it was meant for an international readership and translated by James Bell in 1581.

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