

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

John Bale, Bishop of Ossory.

BY THE REV. W. COWAN, M.A.,
Formerly Vicar of St. Augustine's, Londonderry.

IN the history of the Irish Reformation John Bale occupies a prominent place. He was a strong and strenuous opponent of the Church of Rome, and laboured with exceeding zeal to promote the reformed religion. Full of burning enthusiasm, he spared not himself, but in season and out of season, alike with tongue and pen, he attacked the Pope's authority in Ireland, and sought to spread among the people of his diocese and elsewhere, as the opportunity was given to him, the truths and duties pertaining to the kingdom of Christ. His methods were not always approvable, and his language was often coarse and virulent. He excelled in the *fortiter in re* rather than in the *suaviter in modo*, but his spiritual earnestness was intense, and his sincerity in the cause of Church reform no one could call in question.

Bale was born on November 21, 1495, at the little village of Cove, near Dunwich, in Suffolk. His parents were in humble circumstances and encumbered with a large family, and it is not a little to their credit that they found means to send their son John, first to a Carmelite monastery in Norwich, and afterwards to Jesus College in Cambridge. From the time he entered the convent, when he was only twelve years of age, he seems to have given himself to study. Books were then scarce, but he read with avidity everything he could lay his hands on. And he thought as well as read, and so his mind grew. During the earlier period of his residence at Cambridge, he was, as many of those who afterwards became Reformers in England and elsewhere had been, a vigorous opponent of "the New Learning." Before his conversion he seems to have studied civil law in the University city. The immediate occasion of his conversion, he himself tells us, was the teaching he received from Lord Wentworth. His words are: "I wandered in utter

ignorance of mind, both at Norwich and Cambridge, having no tutor or patron, till the Word of God shining forth, the Churches began to return to the fountain of true divinity, in which bright rising of the New Jerusalem, being not called by any monk or priest, but seriously stirred up by the illustrious, the lord Wentworth, as by that centurion who declared Christ to be the Son of God, I presently saw and acknowledged my own deformity; and immediately through the divine goodness, I was removed from a barren mountain to the flowing and fertile valley of the Gospel, where I found all things built not on the sand, but on a solid rock. Hence I made haste to deface the mark of wicked antichrist, and entirely threw off his yoke from me, that I might be partaker of the lot and liberty of the sons of God." This change in his life and opinions seems to have taken place in 1529.

When he embraced the doctrines of the Reformers, Bale threw off the monastic habit, renounced the vows which he had taken upon his admission to Orders, and shortly afterwards married. Of his wife little is known, except her name, but she appears to have been in sympathy with the Reformation. Bishop Nicholson, speaking of his conversion, says, "His wife, Dorothy, seems to have had a great hand in that happy work." Be that as it may, their union was a long and happy one.

Bale soon became an object of hatred to the Romish clergy, and naturally so, for he gave himself no rest in his denunciation of the doctrines and ceremonial observances of the Church of Rome. Strype relates that he was a zealous decrifier of the Papal Supremacy and worship between 1530 and 1540, adding, "Sometimes we find him in the north, where Lee the Archbishop, imprisoned him, and sometimes in the south, where Stokesley bishop of London, met with him." It would have gone hard with him at this time had he not secured the patronage of Cromwell, Earl of Essex. This powerful Minister of Henry, recognizing the talents of Bale, and finding that his religious views coincided with his own, threw around him his protection, and successfully defended him against his enemies.

He did for him what John of Gaunt had previously done for Wycliffe.

It is said that Cromwell was in the first instance attracted to Bale by his dramas, which were Moralities, or Scriptural plays, setting forth the reformed opinions, and attacking the Roman party. He wrote "The Comedy of John the Baptist," "The Tragedy of God's Promises to Men," "The Three Laws—Nature, Moses, and Christ," all having the same object, the advancement of truth and godliness, and the overthrow of error and vice.

The fall of Cromwell in 1540 changed the position and prospects of Bale. He had proved a true friend to the Reformer, and while he was in power no one dared to touch him. But when the great Minister fell, Bale was at the mercy of his foes. He withdrew to Germany. In Germany he remained eight years, and they were years eventful and fruitful of good, for he was brought into friendly association with Luther, Calvin, and other well-known Continental Reformers. And the intellectual and moral contact deepened and strengthened the religious views of Bale, and every day he became a fiercer and more inflexible opponent of Rome. While on the Continent Bale was not idle. He wrote several controversial works, the chief of which were the collections of Wycliffite martyrologies—"A Brief Chronicle concerning the Examination and Death of the Blessed Martyr of Christ, Sir John Oldcastle, the Lord Cobham, collected together by John Bale, out of The Books and Writings of those Popish Prelates which were present both at his condemnation and judgment," and "The Examination of Master William Thorpe," which Foxe attributes to Tyndale, but the weight of evidence seems to be in favour of the Bale authorship. In 1547, Bale published at Marburg "The First Examination of Anne Askewe, lately martyred in Smithfield by the Romish Pope's Upholders." Another work, which was the fruit of his exile, was an exposure of the monastic system, as it existed in England at the time of the dissolution. It is entitled, "The Actes of Englyshe Votaryes," 1546.

On the accession of Edward VI., Bale returned to England, and shared in the triumphs of the more advanced Reformers. He was appointed to the Rectory of Bishopstoke in Hampshire. He now proceeded to the degree of Doctor of Divinity, and in 1551 was promoted to the Vicarage of Swaffham in Norfolk. He does not appear, however, to have gone into residence there, for within twelve months, when he was nominated to the See of Ossory, we find him still in the southern county. While here he published his commentary on the Apocalypse, which he seems to have composed during his residence abroad. It is called "The Image of bothe Churches after the most wonderfull and heavenlie Revelation of Saint John" (1550). The treatise displays vast learning, reminding us constantly of Jeremy Taylor, and is, perhaps, the best example of Bale's polemical power. The style, however, is coarse and staccato, and almost every page exhibits a lamentable want of taste and moderation. Froude calls Bale the noisiest, the most profane, and the most indecent of the reforming party. Elsewhere he calls him "a foul-mouthed ruffian." The application of the adjective we admit is justifiable in too many instances, as, for example, when he stigmatizes the Dean of St. Patrick's as "ass-headed, a blockhead who cared only for his kitchen and his belly," but to brand him as a "ruffian," is, as far as our reading goes, altogether unwarranted by the evidence. A man is not a ruffian because he calls a spade a spade, and uses rude and contumelious language in reprobation of what he considers soul-destroying error. Bale did not live in the twentieth century. The times when he lived were fierce, and men's manners were rough. Controversialists gave a free rein to tongue and pen alike, and with bitterest feeling flung at one another what L'Hopital calls the *mots diaboliques*. Shakespeare shocks ears polite. Milton's controversial writings display a coarseness of sarcasm and a violence of invective unexcelled. John Knox wrote "The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women," in which he denounces in no measured language the female sex. Bishop South characterizes

some of the Puritan divines as "pert, empty, conceited holders-forth, whose chief (if not sole) intent is to vaunt their spiritual clack." We do not approve of this method of dealing with an opponent, but it was the method of the age, and Bale was no worse than some other public men.

But while he showed himself fiercely intractable towards his enemies and those who opposed him, Bale seems to have been kind and gentle in the ordinary intercourse of life. Luther is an example of this commingling of antipathetic qualities. We must not look for the observance of the rules of politeness in men who have great schemes in their brain, and who, while resolutely seeking to translate them into action, are themselves subjected to cruel abuse and unrelenting persecution. There was no more sincere Reformer in the kingdom than Bale; and though he flung the mud of the streets, if I may so say, as well as more legitimate weapons, at his unscrupulous assailants, this must not blind us to his merits, which were very real and very many. Protestant writers have severely reflected upon him. Let us seek to do him justice.

At the end of the year 1552 he left his pleasant living of Bishopstoke, and with his wife and one servant, and "his books and stuff," proceeded to Bristol, where he took ship, and after a favourable passage of two days and nights reached Waterford. From Waterford he hastened to Dublin, where on February 2, 1553, his consecration took place, as well as that of Hugh Goodacre to the primatial See of Armagh. At the consecration of the two prelates it was proposed to use the old Latin Pontifical, according to which Bishops had hitherto been set apart to their high office, on the ground that the reformed Ordinal had not received the sanction of the Irish Parliament, and, besides, its use would be "an occasion of tumult." Bale absolutely refused, alleging that as the English and Irish Churches were under one temporal head, the King, they ought to be governed by the same laws. His resolute refusal to conform to the ceremonies of an ancient superstition saved the situation, if I may so say, and at the same time displayed the

timid and temporizing policy that continued to actuate the other dignitaries of the Church. Goodacre was willing to be consecrated with the Romish ritual. Even Browne was disposed to acquiesce in its use; but Bale, as I have said, would not consent, and his firmness prevailed. The reformed ritual was adopted. The timid supporters of the Reformation had thus an example set them of uncompromising fidelity to the truth, which, had it been generally followed, would have soon changed the religious aspect of Ireland, and laid the foundation of the ultimate triumph of the reformed faith. It was on this principle that Luther, Calvin, Knox, and the more successful of the Reformers, acted—a principle from which Bale never swerved through the whole course of his ministry. But Bale was supported neither by the Government nor by his clergy.

Goodacre and Bale were consecrated in Christ Church, Dublin, by Browne, the Archbishop, assisted by the Bishops of Kildare, and of Down and Connor, "there being no tumult among the people, and every man, saving the priests, being well contented." After his consecration, Bale at once set out for Kilkenny, the cathedral city and his episcopal residence, and began to preach with great earnestness, exhorting the people to repentance for sin and belief in the Gospel of salvation. So zealous was the new Bishop on behalf of the Reformation that he gave great offence to both the clergy and laity of his diocese. He says: "For this work, helpers found I none among my prebendaries and clergy, but adversaries a great number." The new teaching seems to have taken little hold of the minds of the people, "and everywhere the provisions of the English liturgy were avowedly adopted; they were corrupted by an admixture of Romish superstitions." The Lord's Supper was accompanied with various and vain ceremonies, such as "bowings and beckings, kneelings and knockings," and the dead were bewailed "with prodigious howlings and patterings," as if the redemption by Christ's passion were not sufficient to procure quiet for the souls of the deceased, and to deliver them out of hell, without these "sorrowful sorceries." In his work, "The

Vocation of John Bale to the Bishopric of Ossory in Ireland," he gives us a very graphic picture of the lamentable state of the Church, and of the ignorance and immorality of the people, as well as of the persecutions which he himself endured. "The Lord therefore of His mercy," he writes in one place, "send discipline with doctrine into His Church. For doctrine without discipline and restraint of vices maketh dissolute hearers. And on the other side, discipline without doctrine maketh either hypocrites or else desperate doers."

But the period of his episcopal labours was short, for he had scarcely occupied his see six months when Edward VI. died, and the work of Reformation came to a stand for a time. About two months after the King's death we are told that five of the Bishop's servants were murdered while engaged in making hay in the fields close to his house. And it was intimated to him that the priest party were plotting his own death; and most likely he would have been killed had not the chief magistrate of Kilkenny hastened to his aid with a large force of military. There did not seem to be any well-grounded hope of effecting permanent benefit among the people; and Bale, worn out by his labours and trials, "broken upon the jagged spurs of the earth," privately retired from his diocese and took refuge in Dublin.

From Dublin Bale afterwards made his escape with the intention of going to Holland, but the ship in which he embarked was taken by the captain of a Dutch man-of-war, who stripped him of all his money and effects. His captors being forced by stress of weather to put into St. Ives, in Cornwall, Bale was charged with treason and thrown into prison. He was, however, released after a few days' confinement. But on his arrival in Holland the unhappy prelate was again seized on a false accusation, and imprisoned for three weeks, and was only released on payment of thirty pounds. From Holland he retired to Basle, in Switzerland, where he remained till Queen Mary's death, when he returned a second time from exile; but his constitution was shattered, and he felt no desire to enter

again on the possession of his Episcopal See. In 1560 he was presented to a prebendal stall in the Cathedral of Canterbury, and there he died in November, 1563, in the sixty-eighth year of his age. And there within the sacred precincts of the historic and famed church he was buried.

Bale's episcopal government, it must be admitted, was a failure. How shall we account for it? Nothing is more certain than that revolutions, moral or political, which succeed, are engineered by great men; and those which fail owe their failure largely to the absence of dominant energies. The force of a strong personality, a robust, virile, original character, is almost irresistible in the influence which it exerts upon lesser minds with which it is brought into contact. If the Irish Church could have thrown up a really great leader, as did the Church in Scotland, the Church in Germany, and the Swiss Church, for example, its future would have been very different. But no great man came to the front to guide its progress—to bear down by his force of character adverse influences, or convert them to its advantage—and the results were poor and meagre. Bale was a man of great historical learning, and skilled in divinity beyond most of his contemporaries. He had the power of taking toll of all domains of human knowledge to illustrate his teaching. The proof of this is to be seen especially in his two books, “The Image of Both Churches, Being an Exposition of the most wonderful Book of Revelation of St. John the Evangelist,” and his *magnum opus*, “*Scriptorum Illustrium Majoris Britanniae Catalogus*” (“An Account of the Lives of Eminent Writers of Britain”), which, according to the title, commences with Japhet, the son of Noah, and comes down to A.D. 1567! But Bale was wanting in genius; he was not a leader of men; he had not moral strength to cope with the gigantic evils of his time. And hence he failed.

He was a good man, earnest, faithful, conscientious. He lived not an idle life. As a simple pastor, and as Bishop of an important diocese, he laboured diligently. He also wrote much. As many as ninety printed and manuscript works, most of them

polemical, have been attributed to his pen. He loved work. It was his meat and drink. He might say with Hamlet :

“ Sure, He that made me with such large discourse
Looking before and after, gave me not
That capability and Godlike reason,
To fust in us unused.”

Never was he so happy as when busily engaged in his calling :

“ He bounded joyously to sternest work ;
Less buoyant others turn to sport and play.”

Let me conclude with an epigram taken from Laurence Humphry's “ Vaticinium de Roma,” which shows the opinion entertained by his contemporaries of the value of Bale's labours in the cause of truth :

“ *Plurima Lutherus patefecit Platina multa,
Quædam Vergerius cuncta Balæus habet.*”

It has been metrically rendered in this free way :

“ Luther a *host* of hidden things revealed,
Much Platina disclosed that shock'd the sight,
Somewhat Vergerius saw that lay concealed,
But Bale with piercing eyes drags *all* to light.”



The Modern Conception of God.

BY THE REV. W. ST. CLAIR TISDALL, D.D.

IN our own day, among Englishmen, and in a large measure among Europeans in general, there is a certain definite conception called up in the mind by the word “God.” Of course, it would not be correct to say that this conception is one and the same in every respect in all minds among us. To some the word is of much deeper and fuller meaning than to others. To true Christians the word is the name of One whom they know and love ; to others it recalls a Being of whom they have a certain vague notion, and that only. But, speaking generally, we may venture to say that at the present time the word conveys to our minds the idea of one Personal, Holy, Loving, Just, Merciful, Almighty, All-wise, Eternal Being, who is omnipresent in the universe which He has produced, which He upholds, and which He rules by that system of laws which we term