

The Reformation in Scotland

The Life and Ministry of John Knox

It is sad that little is known of Knox by the majority of Englishmen apart from the fact that he wrote an infamous book about the rule of women, that he browbeat a Scottish queen, that he used to beat a pulpit into pieces, and that he married a girl in her teens when an old man. Three charges are factual but the fourth is questionable. Perhaps many will know of the words which were said over his grave, words which indeed this great man of God merited, "*He neither feared nor flattered any flesh*".

Knox was called of God to do a task very similar to that of the prophet Jeremiah, "*To root out, pull down and to destroy, to throw down, to build and to plant*", a work which he did with enthusiasm. He well deserves the place in Merle d'Aubigne's attribute of praise, "*Knox is the most eminent Christian in the Reformed Church after Calvin*", and the statue of Knox in Geneva today (beside those of Calvin, Farel and Beza) is a worthy reminder of the international unity in the Gospel which was established in those years.

As we proceed to unfold the account of the life of Knox we will arrange our study under the following heads-

- i) The historical setting of England and Scotland in the 16th Cent
- ii) The prevailing conditions political and religious in Scotland
- iii) The historical account of John Knox
- iv) The character and work of Knox.
- v) Some lessons to be learnt from this study.

1. The historical setting of England and Scotland in the 16th century

All we need to do for our benefit is to see the reigning monarchs during that period, both in England and Scotland.

England.

Henry VIII 1509 - 1547

Edward VI 1547 -1553 (favourable to Reformation)

Mary Tudor 155 - 1558

Elizabeth I 1558 - 1603

Scotland

James V 1513 (reigned)

Mary Queen of Scots 1542-1587 (reigned 1543; Mother regent-Mary Lorraine, abdicated 1567)

James VI 1567 - 1625 (also became King of England after Elizabeth 1)

2. The prevailing conditions in Scotland - Political and Religious

1. The Political Scene

The determining motive of most of Scottish political history in this period was fear of dominance by England, persuading it to link the fortunes of the land with those of France. The English suffered three grievous defeats which showed that they were not able to conquer Scotland. On the other hand, Scotland, in alliance with France, was a great peril for England, the more serious when England had broken with the papacy (remember Henry VIII). So both England and France was struggling for control in Scotland. The King of Scotland James V was nephew of Henry VIII, and his grandson James VI was later to become King of Scotland and England as James I. But James VI threw in his lot with France, marrying a daughter of Francis I, and after her death Mary of Lorraine, of the powerful French Catholic family of Guise. This latter union, so important in the history of Scotland, was to have as its fruit Mary Queen of Scots. The Catholic influence in Scotland was thus assured, an influence and power that God was to break and destroy through His servant John Knox

2. The Religious Scene

At the dawn of the 16th century Scotland was a poor and backward country. Its social conditions were medieval. The power of its Kings was small. Its nobles were turbulent. Relatively, its Church was rich in land, owning about one half that of the country. The weak monarchy had usually leaned on the Church. Education was backward.

If the country was backward so also were the priests. When it was suggested that the people be instructed in the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Sacraments and the Lord's Prayer, it was recognised that the inferior clergy of the realm and the prelates had not, for the most part, attained such proficiency in the knowledge of 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.

It is not surprising that at that time the clergy was held in derision. Many of them were so ignorant of the Scriptures that they believed the NT was a recent book written by Martin Luther, and declared they would adhere to the Old Testament, and have nothing to do with the New Testament. At a martyr'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 were in vain and the poor man was burned for his faith in Edinburgh in 1539.

For nearly a thousand years preaching had almost vanished from the Church of Rome. Its place had been taken by various rites and ceremonies, especially the Mass. The altar had become an object of great veneration. In the 13th century preaching friars and the Franciscans and Dominicans made a difference in certain places, yet before the Reformation preaching was given a very minor place indeed.

Irreverence and immorality was notorious in the Church. A certain Cardinal Beaten has on record the legitimisation of eleven bastard sons, and three daughters. 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 remember that married priests were rigorously condemned, sometimes to death

3. The historical account of John Knox

1. His birth and early years.

Born in or near Haddington (ten miles east of Edinburgh) about 1505 (date uncertain), his early career is obscure. He was educated at Glasgow. He was ordained a priest and served as a notary or lawyer, under licence of the Pope. Apart from this little is known. Some Protestant beginnings were made early in Scotland and the news sounded abroad through Tyndale's New Testament in 1526, calling men to transfer their trust from the corrupt Church to the Word of God. This was met with fiery persecution and by 1541 thirteen Christians had suffered death for their faith. Yet the Gospel spread and by 1546 when George Wishart was burned to death, Knox also became a confessor of the Gospel. It was under the influence of Wishart that Knox became acquainted with the Gospel truth and embraced the Reformed principles. When Wishart was arrested Knox tried to defend him.

In 1547 Knox became preacher in St Andrews in Glasgow. But French forces sent to reduce the rebels in St Andrew's castle where the Protestants had taken refuge, took Knox and others captive and he was taken to France for nineteen months where he served the cruel lot of a galley-slave.

2. Knox in England, 1549-1554

He was released from France in 1549 and he came to England. It is often forgotten that Knox spent several years in England and did much to further the cause of the English Reformation. He ministered in tireless energy in the areas of Berwick and Newcastle, and afterwards in the Home Counties (chiefly in Buckinghamshire and principally, perhaps, in the area around Amersham). He was offered a bishopric which he refused. Osmner consulted him when the Articles of Religion were being drawn up and as a Court preacher he made an impression like that at Luther.

It was during his English sojourn that his principles as a very forward and bold reformer were made known. He was very uneasy about the English pattern of Church life under the reign of Edward VI. The reformation was progressing too slowly and it was his conviction that Cranmer and his closest associates were prepared to concede too much to the traditions of the Papist past. Knox stood solidly and immovably on the thesis that the Word of God alone was the source of authority in the Church of God.

This matter came to a head in respect of the vexed question of kneeling at the Lord's Table. The enforcement of the Second Prayer Book (1552) was shortly to begin, and in fact it had already gone to print when Knox delivered his strong protest before the King in a sermon. To Knox kneeling was a positive infringement of the divine law that Christians must at all costs keep themselves from idols. This will prove to us how impressionable was Knox in his preaching. Although the Prayer Book had gone to the printers, under Knox's preaching, Edward VI ordered that a special "*Black Rubric*" be added. The "*Black Rubric*" was an addition to the Prayer Book which was an explanation on the real meaning of kneeling. It was commonly called

a "*Declaration on Kneeling*". In some cases it was put in at the back of the Prayer Book or just after the section on Communion, but the order of the King on the advice of Knox was that this Rubric had to be added to the Prayer Book lest anyone should get the wrong meaning and treat kneeling as an act of veneration. By the King's order the Rubric was printed and had to be pasted into every copy of the book, it was even inserted without Parliamentary authority: Such was the influence of this Scots man. Elizabeth removed the Rubric in 1559 but it was again inserted in the 1662 edition and remains even today.

Knox was also troubled with vestments. John Hooper agreed with him regarding this problem and both said that it was part of the Papist tradition. Hooper was sent to prison for his part in the struggle but afterwards recanted, but Knox stood firm.

3. Knox in Frankfurt, and Geneva. 1554-1555

Mary Tudor came to the throne in 1553 and many English Protestants had to take refuge on the continent. Knox was for a short time pastor of the English refugees in Frankfurt Germany but the Church became divided over his criticisms of the Edwardian Prayer Book. It was quite an interesting situation which demonstrates how progressive was Knox. William Whittingham in Frankfurt drew up an order of service for the English Church and he departed entirely from the Edwardian Prayer Book of 1552. He left out the Litany, the surplice was not to be used at all and he introduced a system of discipline which demanded a declaration of faith on the part of people before they joined the Church. He appointed a Pastor, elders and deacons, preachers.

This was the model for the English Church, the "*Church of the Exiles*" as it was known. Knox was the pastor. Many of the exiles were in favour but there appeared on the scene Richard Cox an influential Anglican. He objected to this pattern and said, "*They would do as they had done in England, and they would have the face of an English Church*". To this John Knox replied, "*The Lord grant it to have the face of Christ's Church*". English Church should be Christ's Church. That was the essential difference between the Anglicans and the Puritans.

Eventually Knox was forced to leave Frankfurt and came to Geneva where he met Calvin. In Geneva he laboured on the Genevan version of the English Bible. He also ministered to another group of English exiles and he was much impressed with the reformation principles of the continent.

4. Knox's return to Scotland. 1555.

In Scotland the political scene had changed. England had alienated Scotland more than ever and Mary Queen of Scots had been betrothed to the heir of the French throne and sent to France for safety in 1548, while her mother, the Guise, Mary of Lorraine (strong Catholic party) became regent in Scotland in 1554.

Knox's visit to Scotland was a short one. Though the northern kingdom was still dominated by French and Catholic power, thirst for the Gospel was widespread through the circulation of the Scriptures-"*Thereby*", says Knox, "*did the knowledge of God wondrously increase, and God gave His Holy Spirit to simple men in great abundance*". Preaching and praying in castles and country districts across the land, Knox was now used to stir the people as never before.

5. Second Geneva exile. 1556

During this period he preached to a group of English exiles and put his hand to writing. He published his famous tract entitled "*The first blast of the trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women*" in 1558. It was a violent discourse against Mary of Guise, asserting that government by a woman is contrary to the law of nature and to Divine ordinance. This pamphlet which appeared shortly before the accession of Elizabeth I earned him the hostility of the English queen, who refused to let him pass through England on his way back to Scotland in 1559.

It must be remembered that in writing this tract Knox was reflecting upon the cruel and terrible reign of Mary Tudor and Mary Queen of Scots. Also he was a man who stood by the Scriptures and did not fear the face of man or woman. We must not think of Knox as being a "*woman hater*". On the contrary he was the pastor to many women in his congregations. He was able to come to the pastoral aid of many women who looked up to his bold stand for the truth.

6. Final return to Scotland. 1559

Knox¹'s final return to Scotland and the hour which would decide his country's destiny came in May 1559. By a secret pact, France had already been promised Scotland by Mary Stuart on her marriage to the French Dauphin, and French arms were at hand to see that no support was lacking in putting down all who questioned the Catholic supremacy. But an irresistible spirit of faith and devotion to Christ had been kindled. In 1557 Bible-reading nobles and peasants had banded together, and referring to themselves as "*the Congregation*", had pledged their whole substance and very lives to set forward and establish "*the blessed Word of God*". And in 1559 the "*Congregation*" had an army. They would not give way when threatened by the Regent. When it was known that Knox intended to preach in St Andrew - a citadel of papal power - Archbishop Hamilton entered the town with a hundred spears affirming that any attempt to preach would be met with a round of shot. Knox did indeed preach. Although he was ready to preach without escort or protection, Christian noblemen - the lord's of the congregation - were present.

Four months after his return the Reformer wrote; "*Notwithstanding the fevers have vexed me.. yet have I travelled through the most part of this realm where (all praise be to his blessed Majesty) men of all sorts and conditions embrace the Truth. We do nothing but go about Jericho, blowing with trumpets as God giveth strength, hoping for the victory by His power alone.*" Power there indeed was as the English ambassador later reported, "*I assure you the voice of this one man, John Knox, is able in one hour to put more life in us than five hundred trumpets continually blustering in our ears. John Knox thundereth out of the pulpit, he ruleth the roost and of him all men stand in fear*".

Suddenly, in 1560 the struggle came to an end. The French forces capitulated to the Scots and English who for the first time were now fighting side by side. A constitution was drafted for the new Reformed Church of Scotland and its Confession was ratified by Parliament who also forbade the mass and decreed that "*The Bishop of Rome bath no jurisdiction nor authority in this Realm in times coming*".

Yet the enemy constantly tried to re-assert itself. In 1561 Mary Queen of Scots, now a widow, returned to Scotland professing to be ready to allow things to remain as they were, yet inwardly determined to use every artifice to re-establish the old religion. Mary won friends, she even tried, by her charm, to win Knox's approval but he remained steadfast. The Protestant nobles were divided and mass was increasingly being used, in fact Mary made no

secret of her religion and had mass said in her chapel to the furious disapproval of Knox.

Scottish Protestantism was flow saved by Mary's mistakes. Involved in murder and intrigue she roused the hostility of both England and Scotland. She fled to England for refuge but was arrested and finally executed for conspiracy against Elizabeth's life.

7. John Knox's death. 1572

On the 9th of November 1572 the voice which had roused the nation was heard for the last time in public, and leaning on the arms of friends and accompanied by his congregation, Knox went home to die.

On the 23rd of November the difficulty of his breathing had greatly increased, and he seems to have thought that his end was near at hand. Apparently supposing his end was come he repeated the Lord's Prayer and the Apostle's Creed adding certain paraphrases of his own on each petition of the prayer and article of the creed to the great comfort of those who stood by; and then lifting up his hands to heaven he once more said, *"Lord into thy hands I commend my spirit"*.

During the succeeding night he caused the 15th chapter of I Corinthians to be read and re-read to him, and repeatedly said to himself, *"Oh how sweet and salutary consolation does the Lord provide for Them in this chapter"*. During the day of the 24th, he seemed to slip into deep sleep and utter groans and cries. When he awoke he was asked what he was dreaming and he replied that in the course of his life he had been subject to many temptations from the devil. Often he had been tempted to despair of God's mercy because of the greatness of his sins, often also tempted by the allurements of the world to forget his calling to endure hardness as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. But now the cunning adversary had assailed him in another form, and endeavoured to persuade him that he had merited heaven itself and a blessed immortality by the faithful discharge of the duties of his high office. But, *"blessed be God who hath brought seasonably to my mind those passages of Scripture by which I was enabled to quench the fiery dart, 'What hast thou, that thou hast not received?'; 'By the grace of God I am what I am'; 'Not I but the grace of God in me'. Wherefore I give thanks to my God by Jesus Christ who has been pleased to grant me the victory. And I am firmly persuaded that in a short time, without any great bodily pain, and without any distress of mind, I shall exchange this mortal and miserable life for an immortal and blessed life through Jesus Christ"*. Soon after he rendered up his spirit and died.

4. The Character and work of John Knox

1. His character.

When a great work has to be done God generally raises up powerful instruments to accomplish that work, and this was never more wonderfully illustrated than in the case of John Knox. He was a man of great firmness, singular comprehension of mind, and the most remarkable mental power, which was a rare combination of strong faith, clear perception, undaunted courage, the most tender sensibility, and the most earnest patriotism.

He towered head and shoulders above all his countrymen. Physical and moral courage are not always combined. We see him carrying the sword before Wishart, amidst the hardships and prostration of the French galleys, and in the face of scowling foes he was brave and determined, inspired with courage his despondent follow-sufferers. He preached with

determination in the face of armed men threatening his life. He was not afraid even when "*no man stood by him*" to speak unwelcome truth to the potentates of the earth. He gives us a most elevated conception of an ambassador of heaven.

In a word, he was a many-sided and most remarkable man, and eminently qualified by God both by gifts and grace for the signal service to which he was called, and which has now stood the test of four centuries of trial. Two things stand out in his character; his unwavering determination and constancy, and his entire submission to the Word of God. It made him stand alone at times in the face of many leading reformers. He had to quit his post in Frankfurt for the sake of his principles; he had to bear the reproaches of several women monarchs for his faithful presentation of the Word. Tenacity is a quality rarely seen today, but a quality much needed. His spirit was that of the Psalmist "*I'll speak thy word to kings, and I with shame shall not be moved; and will delight myself always in thy laws which I loved*".

Martin Lloyd-Jones expressed his view of this great man by saying that he combined the qualities of wisdom, moderation, and originality. Knox was quite willing to disagree with Calvin and the leading reformers like Cox and Cramner. He did not just accept a principle because it was convenient or because it had majority support. He examined everything in the light of Scripture and said "*The Church must have the face of Christ's Church*". On many occasions he stood alone.

2. His work

Something must be said about Knox as a preacher. We must regard Knox as a man of action. He was not particularly high placed as a theologian, though there is such clarity and warmth in his writings that his reputation as such deserves to be raised. He was no recluse but a close student of the Word certainly. He was not a man whose study was his little heaven upon earth. In the days of his strength he loved to initiate ceaselessly. To the end he remained, "*John Knox minister*", "*The Plain Mr Knox*".

Throughout his career Knox was a warrior. He wielded his pen and wrote as if he were earthly leader of the Lord's host militant. But it was with tongue rather than pen that he wages his fierce fight of faith. The sermons preached by Knox, and he was always preaching in season and out of season, were often tremendous in their effect. The whole sanctified personality of the man was alive in his utterance. In the passionate furnace of his words, many were saved by fear, pulled out, as Jude speaks, from their ungodliness, and caused to hate the garment spotted by the flesh. Sin was lashed with vehemence equalled by few in the long history of Christendom. Men who sat under the torrent of his denunciations must have been either petrified with fear or, if repentance forsook them, fired with burning anger against the preacher. He gave the people a great display of the vigour and validity of pulpit utterance in the power of God. He had a fervency of prayer, both in public and private, which was the envy of many men. Spurgeon spoke the truth when he said that, "*when Knox went upstairs to plead with God for Scotland, it was the greatest event in Scottish history*". Mary Queen Scots feared the prayers of Knox more than the armies of England.

An eyewitness of his preaching could say this of Knox, "*Ere had he done with his sermon, he was so active and vigorous that he was like to break the pulpit in pieces and flee out of it*".

Many have suggested that Knox was the founder of English Puritanism. He was a man with an original mind as he sought to reform the Church. In his originality of thought he was not an

"Establishment man". Men would not accept the "*English face on the Church*". For Knox it had to be the Scriptures. He was not a man for tradition for tradition sake. He even took it upon himself to preach to Edward VI opposing the kneeling in the 1552 Prayer Book even though it was in agreement with the other reformers and was in the process of being printed.

He brought out the guiding principle of Puritanism. That is the centrality of Scripture; The Reformer saw that the only authority for the Church was Scripture, every thing had to supported by Scripture. Puritanism was not just concerned with a reformation of doctrine, it was the reformation of the whole Church that was needed and they wanted a New Testament Church. It is what you might call, "*root and branch reformation*". There had to be changes in the whole service of the Church.

John Knox was able to show himself for what he really was by putting his principles into operation. He was not just a theoretical man. If he believed a point nothing would stop him from acting. He refused to use the Edwardian Prayer Book. He was the first man to teach people to take the sacrament sitting down; he substituted bread for the wafer; he refused to baptise the children of excommunicated members; refused the sign of the cross at baptism; refused a bishopric-not believing in bishops. He went ahead and drew up his own order of service in Geneva.

So we see an outstanding man leading the Reformation in Scotland and having no little effect on the continent and in England.

5. Lessons to be learnt

1. The first lesson we can learn for this historical study is the need for godly, sanctified boldness. In many ways Knox stands in the list of heroes of the faith and well deserves the words of Hebrews 11:33-"*Through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received Promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight....*"

He stood out fearlessly against all opposition and spoke Word of God with plainness. Coupled with this was the fact that was not afraid to stand alone for the sake of the truth.

There are many times in the Christian life when the Christian is called upon to make a bold witness for Christ. He must be prepared to stand alone if need be, he must be prepared to speak and not be silent for the cause of the Gospel and Truth.

2. We can learn from the centrality of Scripture in his life. The debate at Frankfurt over the "*face of the Church*" is a typical example. As we consider this Church it is necessary that we join with Knox and say, "*It must have the face of Christ's Church*". Many will come and say like Cox, "*It must have the face of the Baptist Church*". Like Knox we must stand for Scripture before tradition and desire to see only Christ's face upon the Church.

Knox was anti-Establishment; he would not fall in line with tradition of the Established Church of England. Some Christians today may feel that they also are anti-Establishment being in a non-conformist tradition. But it does not necessarily follow. We can by principle be as bound to establishment as were some of these early reformers. Scripture must make us by principle anti-Establishment when the Establishment does not do justice to Scripture.

If only we can adopt this fine principle of examination of all things in the light of Scripture:

3. As we look upon the state of the Church today are we not drawn to the conclusion that we are in need of a second Reformation? We might pray as did the Psalmist (Ps 44:26) "*Rise up and come to our help*". As we look back into history we can see how God is able to raise up the right man for the right task. Some criticise Knox for his stubbornness and strict determination, but the times in which he lived demanded such a man. He was likened to the OT prophets who thundered out the Word of God. The days of the 16th cent were in need of such a powerful preacher and an earnest labourer who without a desire to fear of flatter anyone would see what had to be done and give himself body and soul to the work. Such a man did God raise up in Scotland. Let us earnest pray to God that in these days of religious and political downgrade He might be pleased to raise up another such leader.

"We have heard with our ears, O God, our Fathers have told us, what deeds thou didst perform in their days"

Richard Lee