

Few men in history are known to have impacted the religious identity of an entire nation. It is among this select company that John Knox justly bears the title *Reformer of Scotland*. His name still appears in lists of influential Protestant Reformers of that great sixteenth-century Reformation like Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and Cranmer. Yet most would be hard-pressed to offer more information on his life and achievements, even Presbyterians who point to him as their founder. There are several reasons for this. Knox' teaching and his role in the Scottish Reformation were largely bound up with political questions, particularly who was to rule Scotland and under what circumstances rebellion was justified. Few of Knox' spiritual successors today share his sentiments when it comes to the biblical teaching on civil government. Although it was substantially the same as Calvin's view, Knox and the Reformation that he led are identified with his view of civil authority in perhaps the same way that Calvin is identified with the doctrine of predestination. Many today, even within Presbyterian and Reformed circles, regard his efforts to see the lawful establishment of Reformed Christianity in Scotland as an aberrant holdover from the medieval understanding of the roles of church and state. It is necessary to put his teachings on these subjects in the context of the great turmoil and persecution that attended the newborn Reformed Church in Scotland in the sixteenth century. Knox' teaching on the civil magistrate was not mere expediency. It was absolutely essential to guard the survival of the Reformed Church in Scotland against her mortal enemies that attacked from every side. Another reason why Knox is not as well-known or remembered as some of the other Reformers is that he has left comparatively little behind him in the way of doctrinal or exegetical writings. Knox himself gives an apt explanation,

That I did not in writing communicate my judgment upon the Scriptures, I have ever thought myself to have most just reason. For, considering myself rather called of my God to instruct the ignorant, comfort the sorrowful, confirm the weak, and rebuke the proud, by tongue, and by lively voice, in these most corrupt days, than to compose books for the age to come, (seeing that so much is written, and by men of most singular erudition, and yet so little well-observed); I decreed to contain myself to the bounds of that vocation, to which I found myself especially called.¹

Knox saw his calling not in terms of making a name for himself for future generations, but in working in his generation to set the Reformed Church on such a sure foundation that generations to come would be taught to know and love the Savior through the labors of other men that would come after him. Among historians Knox is a controversial figure. His character is often-maligned by self-appointed apologists for the Roman papacy or Mary Queen of Scots. Yet the great Scottish Reformer, who was intimately acquainted with such men of God as John Calvin, Hugh Latimer, and Theodore de Beza, generally held the highest renown of all Reformers among the Reformed Churches of the world after Calvin's death².

Knox was born in Lothian, Scotland in 1505 according to some scholars, and 1514 according to others. Relatively little is known of his life prior to his conversion to the Reformed faith. He was trained as a priest in the scholastic theology of his day at the university of St. Andrews. There he acquired an aversion to the subtleties of scholastic theology and its corresponding methodology. Nonetheless Knox had received ecclesiastical orders by 1530. By the hand of Providence he came into contact with Reformers like George Wishart, who were influenced by Tyndale and the Protestant teachings then emanating from the continental centers such as Marburg and Wittenberg. Knox began to preach and to teach. At that time Scotland was ruled by the Queen Regent, Mary of Guise, who assumed royal powers during the legal heir's childhood. The

¹ Thomas M'Crie, *The Life of John Knox*, (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1991), 214.

² Ibid, 203.

Queen Regent, a Frenchwoman, harbored no little prejudice against the Reformation. She saw it as a threat to the royal prerogative. Yet through the preaching of the word by Knox and his colleagues and by the effectual work of the Holy Spirit, the kingdom of God was coming to rule in the hearts of many a Scottish commoner, merchant, and noble. Mary Guise mercilessly oppressed the Protestants. Knox' mentor, George Wishart was burned at the stake³. In desperation and in search of refuge, a group of Protestants stormed the castle of St. Andrews. There they met with that cruel and bloody murderer of the saints, Cardinal Beaton, whom they hung over castle wall. For a time a band of Protestants led by the lairds of Longniddrie and Ormiston holed up in St. Andrews' castle. They were in desperate need of a pastor, and John Knox was compelled to accept the call. There he characteristically exhorted, reproved, and encouraged the Protestants to hold fast to the faith of their calling and to put their trust in the God of their salvation alone, not in the efforts of their own hands. Knox began to personify that tireless labor of love for the flock of God which would so characterize his life and ministry. In 1528 St. Andrews' castle fell to the French forces of the Queen Regent. Knox and others were persuaded to accept terms of surrender which included their banishment from Scotland but promised them freedom outside the kingdom. Once taken into custody, their captors reneged on the agreement. The Reformer was confined as a slave rowing inside the hull of a French galley. Being released from captivity nineteen months later through the efforts of King Edward VI of England⁴, Knox returned to the the island of Britain⁵.

³Wishart's earnest pleas finally convinced Knox to flee rather than to suffer martyrdom by his side.

⁴ Ian Murray, *John Knox*, audiotape of a lecture presented at a meeting for the Leicester Conference in Leicester, England (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust).

⁵ John Knox, *History of the Reformation in Scotland*, ed. William C. Dickinson, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950), vol I, 60-110.

M'Crie, 15-41.

Knox yearned more than anything to return to his homeland, but knowing that his life was in danger there, he found refuge in England. The young King Edward VI was a godly man in favor of a full Reformation along the lines of that advocated by English Puritans like Hugh Latimer and Thomas Cranmer. He appointed Knox to a post in Berwick in the north country near the Scottish border as an itinerant preacher. The region where the Reformer was called to preach was one of the darkest in all the kingdom, full of the old Roman superstitions. Tonsal, the bishop of Durham, was staunchly anti-reformational, having been one of the chief accusers of William Tyndale at his execution⁶. Knox labored tirelessly to draw the population away from the Romanist shackles to the living Christ by consistently and plainly preaching the gospel from town to town. He taught that the mass was nothing less than idolatry⁷. The Reformer operated on the premise that any addition to worship outside of what God's word prescribes is forbidden. It has sometimes been supposed that Knox was essentially a pupil of the great French Reformer John Calvin. Yet this is an underestimation of Knox. This doctrine known among Reformed Christians as the *regulative principle of worship* was clearly evident in Knox' teaching during those pre-Geneva years. Knox profoundly influenced the direction of the Church of England. He succeeded in revising some of the most offensive parts of the liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer, although not entirely to his satisfaction. Edward VI offered him a position as rector of a large established church and then a bishopric, but Knox turned down both posts because he could not then constrain himself by the rule and order of the Anglican Church without violating his conscience. In

⁶ Murray.

⁷ John Knox, *A Vindication of the Doctrine that the Sacrifice of the Mass is Idolatry* [book online] (Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, accessed 25 June 2005; available from <http://www.swrb.com/newslett/freebook/jknox.htm>; Internet.

England Knox exposed the lies of the papacy, and through his preaching many hearts were turned to Jesus the Savior⁸.

The righteous King Edward VI passed away at the age of sixteen, and suddenly the political scene in England was turned on its head. Mary Tudor, Edward's sister, assumed the throne, bringing with her a thoroughly papist outlook and a persecuting spirit. Many of the Lord's most eminent saints in the realm were called home in those days, when the fury of Satan's kingdom was unleashed on the church in all its fury. Knox and several of his comrades fled to the continent, where they were cordially welcomed by the brethren in cities like Straßburg and Geneva. While “bloody” Mary did her worst, Knox, Whittingham, and others were nourished by the biblical teaching in Geneva. There they published the “Geneva Bible” which would profoundly influence the religion of generations of Scots and Englishmen. This fresh Bible translation revised the faithful labors of Tyndale with the addition of copious study notes to aid in the understanding of Holy Scripture. Knox spent some time as a pastor of the English congregation in Straßburg. There was a great conflict between those who favored the traditional liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer and those who supported a more thorough-going reformed worship patterned after the Genevan Order. Knox' sympathies clearly lay with the simpler Genevan liturgy, yet his pastoral care and exhortations during the debate show a gentle and humble spirit of forbearance and moderation as he sought compromise between the two factions⁹.

⁸ Ibid., *History*, vol I, 110.
M'Crie, 42-59.

⁹ Ibid, 43-60.

John Knox, *A Brief Exhortation to England, for the Speedy Embracing of the Gospel Heretofore by the Tyranny of Mary Suppressed and Banished* [book online] (Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, accessed 25 June 2005; available from <http://www.swrb.com/newslett/freebook/jknox.htm>; Internet.

Knox cherished the Christian fellowship and theological learning that he had enjoyed during his sojourn on the Continent, but his heart yearned to return to his native land to encourage the infantile Reformed Church. Scottish lords who had embraced the Reformation banded together the *Congregation* of Protestants for mutual defense. Mary Guise intermittently made promises of toleration to the Protestants in order to lull them into complacency. All the while she tightened her grip with the support of occupying French armies. When Knox received word that the Reformed Scots were holding fast to their profession of faith, he perceived that it was the right time to return. A wanted man, Knox laid low and preached in secret gatherings, exhorting and admonishing the flock to trust in God and purge their hearts of idolatry. After prolonged efforts, he secured the military aid of Queen Elizabeth I in the cause of the *Congregation*. By the hand of providence, the Protestants fought to a truce. Simultaneously the Queen Regent died. Both sides agreed to call a Parliament which would decide the question of religion for Scotland. By the gracious operation of the Holy Spirit, the Reformation had taken hold in the hearts of the people. When Parliament convened in 1560, Knox and his fellow ministers presented a Book of Discipline and a Confession of Faith¹⁰ and defended them from the Scriptures. The present representatives of the Roman Church sat speechless. Abolishing the mass, Scotland's Parliament established a reformation of religion such as the world has rarely seen¹¹.

This triumph did not mark the end of Knox' struggles. Until the end of his life,

Ibid., *History*, vol I, 118.

¹⁰ Ibid., et al., *The Scottish Confession of Faith* [book online] (Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, accessed 25 June 2005; available from <http://www.swrb.com/newslett/freebook/jknox.htm>; Internet.

¹¹ Ibid., *History*, vol I, 121-374.
M'Crie, 61-85.

and especially following the return of the now-grown Queen Mary Stuart, he labored tirelessly to defend the Church of Scotland against the Queen and the recroach of Romanism. Knox's body had never fully recovered from his stint as a galley slave. A hard life eventually took its toll, and the Reformer of Scotland gave up the ghost in Edinburgh November 24, 1572¹².

¹² Knox, *History*, vol II, 7-216.
M'Crie, 126-201.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Knox, John. *History of the Reformation in Scotland*. ed. William C. Dickinson. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950). vols I-II.

Knox' magnum opus, this account gives a first-hand look into all the persons and events of the Scottish Reformation. It provides great insight into the mind and temperament of the Reformer.

_____. *A Brief Exhortation to England, for the Speedy Embracing of the Gospel Heretofore by the Tyranny of Mary Suppressed and Banished* [book online] (Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, accessed 25 June 2005); available from <http://www.swrb.com/newslett/freebook/jknox.htm>; Internet.

This epistle shows Knox' pastoral heart as he exhorts the Protestants remaining in England under “Bloody Mary” to remain true to their profession.

_____, et al. *The Scottish Confession of Faith*. _____.

This document served as the doctrinal standard of the Scottish Church from its ratification by Parliament in 1560 until 1647 when the Westminster Confession was approved by her General Assembly.

_____. *A Vindication of the Doctrine that the Sacrifice of the Mass is Idolatry*. _____.

A representative example of Knox' preaching during his work in northern England.

Secondary Sources

M'Crie, Thomas. *The Life of John Knox*. (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1991).

This 1811 biography of Knox is still in print for a reason. It is unmatched in its spiritual quality and insight into the Reformer's character.

Murray, Ian, *John Knox*, audiotape of a lecture presented at a meeting for the Leicester Conference in Leicester, England (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust).

One of the Church's greatest historians delivered this lecture on the anniversary of Knox' death. He brings the major events together, highlighting the major themes of the Reformer's life and lessons drawn from it.

In all the struggles of the Reformer's eventful pilgrimage in this world one thing that is evident is that he did not count his worldly life to be precious, but forsook everything for the glory of Christ in his kingdom. When it came to the pleasures and honors of this world, Knox, like the apostle Paul, counted them but dung, that he might win Christ. This heavenly frame of heart is evident throughout Knox' life. It lead to two particular traits which characterized his conduct in the world, tireless labor and an utter lack of fear before the face of men. For most of his life Knox preached two or more sermons every day of the week. His itinerant pastoring in England, his labors in Germany and in his native land all put a strain on his human frame. Yet Knox carried on with a zeal that only the Holy Ghost could engender. He preached every day, until, in the infirmity of old age, he could no longer hold to that schedule. Then when his voice began to weaken he transferred to a smaller parish so he could continue to preach to a lesser audience. His tireless labor shows the great love he had for Christ's church and the sense of urgency with which he desired that they would persevere faithfully to the end. Knox feared no man on earth. He boldly preached the word of God in the presence of lords and royalty, and never cared so much for his own life as he did for God's blessed truth and for the eternal good of those around him. He disputed with the Queen in person on more than one occasion concerning her reintroduction of the “idolatrous” mass in Scotland, even debating with her the right of citizens to defend their lives with arms as a last resort¹³. The Reformer's style was more plain than tactful. Knox stands out as a rare example of one who feared God rather than men. When his body was laid in the grave, the Regent gave a fitting eulogium, “There lies he, who never feared the face of man¹⁴.”

¹³ Knox, vol II, 13-20.

¹⁴ M'Crie, 201.