

Blowing the Trumpet: John Knox and the Scottish Reformation

A Scottish cab driver was taking an American tourist around Edinburgh, showing him the sights of the city. They went up to the mound and looked at the castle, and then they started driving down toward Holyrood Palace on the Royal Mile. Soon they came to John Knox's house. The Scottish cab driver said, "That is the house of John Knox." The American, who was not informed about church history, was puzzled about that statement, so he asked, "Who was John Knox?" The Scottish cab driver, in great disgust and dismay, said, "Go home, man, and read your Bible."

John Knox is not really in the Bible. He is not any of the Johns in the Bible. Yet some Scots and some Presbyterians put John Knox quite high on the list of the heroes of the faith. Other people, however, see John Knox in quite a different light. Samuel Johnson, the Englishman, did not love John Knox. He talked about Knox as being one of the "ruffians" of the Reformation. Many people know John Knox as the stern, Calvinistic, Presbyterian preacher who made the queen cry.

I will talk about the life of John Knox and identify some of the contributions of this important figure in the sixteenth century. Let me begin with a prayer from Knox.

"Because we have need continually to crave many things at Your hands, we humbly beg You, O heavenly Father, to grant us Your Holy Spirit to direct our petitions, that they may proceed from such a fervent mind as may be agreeable to Your holy will. Amen."

In the previous lesson, while considering the Reformation in England, I had to talk about kings and queens. The Reformation in Scotland, England's northern neighbor, focused on the relationship between a queen, Mary Queen of Scots—and her Catholic family—and a Presbyterian preacher named John Knox. I will talk about Knox first and then consider Mary.

John Knox is described in Sherwood Wirt's poem as "God's man for God's work in God's time." Knox was a Catholic priest. In his early life, he became a notary, or lawyer. Later he was a tutor, teaching a group of boys. Finally he emerged more fully into view as a bodyguard, standing with the Protestant preacher George Wishart as Wishart proclaimed the Protestant faith in Scotland. Wishart was one of the pioneers of the coming of the Reformation to the land of Scotland. Wishart was Reformed in his convictions, and he was a strong preacher. He disturbed the Catholic authorities and soon was arrested. Those authorities were led by the Catholic Cardinal Beaton. It became obvious to people that Wishart was going to be arrested. Knox was with Wishart as his bodyguard, holding a sword. He must have expected that he was going to have to do something to protect his friend, the Protestant preacher, from being captured by the cardinal and put to death. George Wishart told John Knox, "Go home to your *bairns* [which means "children"]. One is sufficient for sacrifice." So Knox took his sword, went home, and Wishart was killed.

John Knox appeared next in Saint Andrews in Scotland in a castle that had been taken over by Protestants. Some of them had been involved in a revenge killing of the cardinal. These Protestants took over the castle on the sea at Saint Andrews in order to survive any counterattack against them. That castle was not captured by land, by other Scots, but it was captured by sea by the French. It was the time of the "Old Alliance," as it was called. France and Scotland were in league against their mutual enemy, England. When the French captured the castle, Knox was taken as a captive.

He spent over a year, almost two years, as a galley slave, working in the French ships. He later wrote, “I know how hard the battle is between the spirit and the flesh, under the heavy cross of affliction, where no worldly defense, but present death does appear. I know the grudging and murmuring complaints of the flesh; I know the anger, wrath and indignation, which it conceives against God, calling all His promises in doubt, and being ready every hour to utterly fall from God.” I believe that when Knox wrote this he was thinking of the earlier time when God seemed to have forsaken him and he ended up in the ship as a slave of the French.

Eventually Knox was released. He went to England where he had ministry during the reign of Edward VI. It was a bright and promising time for Protestantism in England. Yet it took only six years until Edward’s sister Mary began to rule. When Mary Tudor, “Bloody Mary,” came to the throne, people like Knox were in a great deal of danger. Some died as martyrs during that period. John Knox fled to the continent.

He spent some time in Frankfurt, Germany. There was some trouble there because Knox was leading a group of English people who were living in Frankfurt. Knox had a certain idea about how the church should be reformed, and there were other English people there who disagreed with him. Thus in Frankfurt was the beginning of what I will later talk about as the Puritan and Anglican controversy. Knox took the stricter position, wanting to purify the Church of England more thoroughly than it had already been reformed.

Due to the trouble in Frankfurt, Knox moved on to Geneva. He spent some time there with Calvin. It was a period of joy in Geneva, for Knox was delighted to be in that city, which he called “the most perfect school of Christ that ever was on earth.” Knox preached in Geneva to English refugees. It would have been remarkable to have lived in Geneva in those days and to be able to speak French and English. One could go to hear John Calvin preach and then go across the street and hear John Knox preach. That would have been a great experience.

While Knox was living in Geneva, he looked longingly to England and to Scotland, hoping that something like he had experienced in Geneva could be realized in those countries as well. Everywhere he looked, however, there was a woman named Mary who was ruling and very much opposed to the Protestant faith. What was John Knox going to do? He did something that he should not have done. He wrote a book, which he called *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*. The word “regiment” in that title meant “rule.” He decided to attack the legitimacy of the rule of the three Maries. One Mary was Mary Tudor in England and another was Mary Queen of Scots in Scotland, although she had moved to France because she had married the king of France. The third was the mother of Mary Queen of Scots, whose name was also Mary, who was serving as the queen regent. Knox attacked the rule of women in the book. He said, “Divine law and natural law opposes the rule of women over men. Therefore men in England and Scotland are obeying women rulers against God. Wherefore I judge them not only subjects to women but slaves to Satan and servants of iniquity.” Knox never said anything gently.

Knox said women should not rule over men. That was a kind of call for revolution. People could read between the lines and realize that what John Knox really wanted was for men in the two countries to rise up and overthrow the women rulers and bring in Protestant rulers. John Knox wrote the book in Geneva. It was an embarrassment to John Calvin. Calvin explained that when Knox came to him with the idea of writing such a book, Calvin strongly discouraged him from doing it. Calvin pointed to Deborah and Huldah, women in the Old Testament who were legitimate rulers. Calvin was also concerned about Knox’s approach, because Calvin was very conservative in his view of overthrowing kingdoms. He told

the Huguenots in France that it was better to suffer than to create anarchy and revolution. Calvin did not open much of a door for any kind of revolution. John Knox did open such a door in his *First Blast of the Trumpet* for revolution in Scotland and elsewhere.

I do not want to try to defend John Knox at this point and say that he was right in any sense in what he said in his *First Blast*. I do think the purpose behind what Knox was doing was not merely to get rid of women rulers, but it was to open up the possibility for reform in Scotland and England. As far as he could see, such reform could take place if it were not for the Maries. They were strong Catholic women rulers who were standing against the reform of the church. It was not only a gender issue, but it was also an issue of the religious proclivities of the monarchs. If there had been male rulers standing against the Reformed faith, Knox would have written something. It would not have been the same, but there would have been a “First Blast” in that situation too, calling for a rising up against Catholic sovereigns. He wanted to open up the door for the establishment of the Protestant faith.

It is clear that Knox’s *First Blast* was a tactical error. It did not help him, and it did not help the reform. It caused many problems for the reform, and it has caused many problems for John Knox’s reputation until the present. One major problem was that *The First Blast* came out just in time to offend the Protestant Elizabeth. Mary had died. Elizabeth became the queen, and she never cared much for John Knox or the Presbyterians. When the Scottish Presbyterians and John Knox needed Elizabeth, in order to further the Reformation in Scotland, she did help in time. Yet she took great offense, as you can understand. Knox understood it too. He realized he had made a mistake. He said, “*The First Blast of the Trumpet* blew away all my friends in England.”

Eventually John Knox went back to Scotland. It was not safe for him to go back for a while, but eventually he did return in 1559. That is the date that we can use for the beginning of the Reformation in Scotland. He went back to Scotland, asking for prayer that he would “shrink not when the battle approaches.” John Knox was not a man to shrink from a battle. The English ambassador to Scotland said that Knox “put life into the people more than 500 trumpets blaring at once.” *The Life of John Knox*, written by Stanford Reid, which is one of the best biographies of Knox, calls him “God’s trumpeter.” Someone said of Knox, “God knew what He was doing when He chose [Knox] to build His church.”

As Knox returned to Scotland and began the work of reformation, we see him as a Reformer and as a preacher. As a Reformer he wrote the Scots Confession of 1560, which was the first Scottish Protestant confession of faith. He did not write it by himself. There were five other men, all with the first name of John, and these six Johns all worked together and produced the Scots Confession in five days. It is a remarkable confession. It contains simple, fervent Calvinism. Someone has said that it is “as craggy and irregular and powerful as the hills in northern Scotland.” It served the church in Scotland all the way down to the time of the Westminster Confession, when the Scottish Kirk adopted the Westminster Standards alongside of the historic and beloved Scots Confession as the standard for the church in Scotland.

Not only did Knox write the Scots Confession, but he also wrote the *First Book of Discipline*. It is a book of church polity. The church had a new theology, Calvinism, and it also had a new polity, Presbyterianism. The *First Book of Discipline* was Knox’s effort to put into a book the polity that would be practiced in the Church of Scotland. It was basically Presbyterian church polity, but what is interesting about the book is that Knox went beyond what we normally think of as church business into national issues. He approached topics such as education. Knox was concerned that every child in Scotland have the opportunity to go to school. Much of the money that was raised in the sale of the monasteries went into the provision of universal training for children in Scotland. Some of the money

also went to take care of the poor. So it was not a narrow understanding of church polity, but it included the church's involvement with culture and with the world and with national life. Knox insisted that poverty relief and a universal system of education was also the responsibility of the church. That has not always remained the responsibility of the church, such as when the state has done more in those areas. In Scotland at that time, however, if the church had not taken care of schooling and the poor, then nobody would. In only several generations, Scotland went from being one of the poorest and most illiterate countries in Europe to one of the best educated and most prosperous countries in Europe.

John Knox was not only a Reformer, but he was also a preacher. He did not like to write books, although he did write some. We do not have many of his sermons, but we have some. We have a number of his books, one of which I will describe in more detail. He loved to preach. He believed he was called to preach. He said, "I consider myself rather called by my God to instruct the ignorant, comfort the sorrowful, confirm the weak, and rebuke the proud, by tongue and living voice, in these corrupt days, than to compose books for the age to come." We do not have a vast amount of books from Knox, like we do from Luther and Calvin. Knox was a person who believed he was called to preach. The text he used repeatedly was "Unto me is this grace given, that I should preach the unsearchable riches of Christ." If you go to Edinburgh, and if you go to John Knox's house, there is a stained-glass window in the house with some of the symbols of the Scottish Reformation. There is also a picture of John Knox with that text included.

Knox was a preacher who used plain speech. There was nothing fancy or even elegant about the preaching of Knox. There were just plain English, Scottish, words. Knox insisted, "The Word of God is plain in itself." He wanted to present it without embellishment. He set it forth in plain language. John Knox said, "In the pulpit I am not master of myself, but I must obey Him who commands me to speak plainly." You find that word repeatedly in Knox's language and his preaching. One of the books about John Knox is called *The Plain Mr. Knox*, because he used that concept and word so often.

He used plain speech, but it was also powerful preaching. The poem by Wirt says that "more gracious messengers have preached the Word of Christ without a-dinging the pulpit." It was said that Knox would "ding" the pulpit, which meant that he would hit it very hard. People who would listen to him preach would remark about how he was so vehement in his preaching that he would hit the pulpit, and he would almost seem to be flying out of it. There is a famous painting by Sir David Wilkie that shows John Knox preaching at Saint Andrew's in 1559 to the Duchess of Argyle and the lords of the congregation and some Catholic clergy. In that painting he appears to be flying out of the pulpit because he was so involved in what he was doing and he was so powerful in his utterance of the Word of God.

After all that about John Knox, I must say something about Mary Queen of Scots. When she came back to Scotland from her time in France, she was 18 years old. She was the daughter of James V of Scotland. She had married Francis, the king of France, who died quite soon after their marriage. She was no longer queen of France, but she was still queen of Scotland. So rather than staying in France, she went back to Scotland. That was just after Knox had arrived. Knox had arrived first, and the Reformation was underway when Mary arrived. She was the charming Catholic queen of what had become a thoroughly Protestant country.

The stage was then set for the five famous meetings between John Knox and Mary Queen of Scots. Knox knew the temptations to compromise—the dulcet voice pleading in tears, the soft hand of steaming sovereignty. They were very interesting encounters. Justo Gonzalez says they were "increasingly tempestuous interviews." Gonzalez gives the impression that Knox was a bully, and many books say so explicitly. I do not believe that Knox was ever rude or disrespectful to the queen. In the

first meeting that he had with her, he said she could be a Deborah in the kingdom. Knox had learned something from his earlier mistake. He saw that if Mary would repent and be converted to the true religion then she could rule as Deborah had ruled in Israel. That was not of interest to Mary. At first she practiced her Catholicism privately. She had the Mass served in her palace, alone. Yet John Knox feared a Mass anywhere. Thus a collision course was set for two people who were very much opposed to one another, and it could only lead to one or the other winning.

In the fourth meeting between Knox and Mary, the queen had almost had enough of the Presbyterian preacher. He had been preaching about her in his sermons and the National Kirk. She did not like that. She asked Knox what he had been saying about her. So Knox invited her to the church to hear him preach so that she would know exactly what he was saying. She did not like that, so she finally said, “What are you in this commonwealth?” The implication was, she knew she was the queen, so who did he think he was. Knox’s answer was that he was a subject, born in Scotland. Even though he was not an important person—a lord, earl, or baron—he could be a profitable citizen of the kingdom. Someone has said that modern democracy was born in John Knox’s answer to Mary Queen of Scots.

The sequel to this struggle between the preacher and the queen was a sad story, as far as Mary was concerned. She so offended her subjects by her life and behavior that public scandal finally forced her to abdicate in 1567. She lost the support of the people. She was implicated in murder, adultery, and in a number of crimes. She had to flee, which she did, going to England. That was probably not what she should have done, because her cousin Elizabeth, who was a strong Protestant, put Mary Queen of Scots in prison. She was kept there for 20 years, and Elizabeth finally executed her at a time when there were constant Catholic threats surrounding Mary Queen of Scots, because Mary had a claim to the English throne as well as the Scottish throne. Thus from 1567 until his death in 1572, John Knox was able to carry on the Reformation in Scotland without hindrance.

One of the books he wrote, which was really a set of books, is *The History of the Reformation of Religion within the Realm of Scotland*. It is history, but it is also a good, vehement, long, sermon in Knox’s style. It is the kind of history I like. It is history that is preached. It is certainly written from Knox’s point of view. He tells the story of the history of the Reformation in Scotland as God’s work, opposed by the devil. God overcomes the devil and the devil’s forces in order to bring the truth to the land of Scotland.

Finally, John Knox died on December 24, 1572. Two days before his death he said, “I have been in meditation these last two nights concerning the troubled church of God, the spouse of Jesus Christ, despised of the world, but precious in His sight. I have called to God for it, and I have committed it to her Head, Jesus Christ.” In the words of Martin Lloyd-Jones in a lecture he gave on John Knox, “Let us take farewell of this noble, rugged, and yet tender and even lovable spirit, as he came to leave this world and to receive his eternal reward.” The account of his death given by his daughter is this: “At about midday he asked his wife to read aloud the 15th chapter of the first epistle to the Corinthians, and said he had commended his soul, his spirit, and his body to God, ticking off soul, spirit, and body on three fingers. At about five o’clock he said, ‘Go read where I cast my first anchor.’” We do not know how Knox became a Protestant, but apparently there is a hint in that statement. His wife read to him the 17th chapter of John’s Gospel. John 17 must have had some major impact upon the young John Knox to bring him into a true understanding of salvation. His daughter continued, “When evening prayers were read about 10:00 PM, the doctor asked him if he heard the prayers. Knox replied, ‘I would to God that ye and all men heard them as I have heard them, and I praise God for that heavenly sound. Now it has come,’ he shortly added.” Those were his last words.

Dr. Lloyd-Jones said, “There can be no doubt that as he crossed the heavenly trumpets sounded on the other side as this great warrior of God entered in and received his eternal crown of glory.” If you go to Edinburgh to the New College library, which is also on the way to the General Assembly Hall of the Church of Scotland, you will pass a statue of John Knox. If you saw the movie *Chariots of Fire*, it is the statue that Eric Liddel was passing on his way to a meeting, and he went back, took his cap off, put it back on, and then continued on to the meeting. John Knox was a man whose influence is certainly felt not only in Scotland—though not as much anymore in Scotland as it should be—but also through the Scottish Reformation and through the expansion of the Presbyterian Church around the world.

The closing words of the Scots Confession, which John Knox wrote in 1560, form a prayer. I will use those words as I conclude this lesson on John Knox: “Arise, O Lord, and let Thine enemies be confounded; let them flee from Thy presence that hate Thy godly name. Give Thy servants strength to speak Thy Word with boldness, and let all nations cleave to the true knowledge of Thee.”

One question people have about Knox is whether his view on church polity was taken from Calvin or original to himself. It was both. He took much from Calvin. Knox was not as much of an original thinker as Calvin was. Much of what Knox taught in both theology and polity came from Calvin. Yet he did add to it. What arose in Scotland was the organization of a national church. In Geneva, the church could only grow to the level of a presbytery, made up of the major church in the city and also the surrounding churches. In Scotland, however, it covered the whole country. So the Presbyterian system was more fully developed, not only into presbyteries but also a general assembly.

Another question is whether Knox was a theonomist. He was not a theonomist, as Calvin was not a theonomist. He was certainly a person who believed in a strong connection between the church and the state. There was no thought that there could be anything else. The state was either going to be Catholic or Protestant. Whatever the state was, the church would be. Knox did not argue for pluralism. It was either one or the other. He did not want to have one Mass said in Scotland, even in the privacy of the queen’s own apartments in the palace. He viewed that as the beginning of something that would eventually take over. That strikes us as strange, and even narrow-minded, but in the sixteenth century, except for a few Anabaptists, nobody was prepared to think otherwise.

Another question is how Knox explained his divergence from Calvin on the subject of women who were in authority. Calvin supported it and said not to unsettle established government. Knox explained his view on this issue of women rulers by saying that Deborah and Huldah were exceptions. He said that men had done so poorly that God, partly to punish men, gave them women rulers. Later he may have been able to make more exceptions as well, particularly if he had seen Mary Queen of Scots convert to Protestantism.

There was also the issue of revolution. Calvin discouraged it, but Knox seemed to encourage it. Even though Calvin slammed the door on revolution, he left a little crack in the door. That crack was that, even though people cannot rise up and take over a government, properly constituted magistrates may change the government. There was the “third estate” in France, which was not very active and did not have much power. Calvin viewed it as a legitimate entity within government, with certain responsibilities in France, and it would be right for those magistrates in the third estate to act. A popular uprising, however, would not have been acceptable to Calvin. Knox saw that crack in the door, and he pushed it open. Knox did not advocate for the Lords of the Congregation to engage in revolution, which would have been the comparable position to Calvin. He seemed to call upon the people to act. He said, “Let kings fear, let them tremble, because there is judgment coming if they do not do what is right.”

That is not explicitly telling people to go out and fight, but it is encouraging a certain understanding of things that might lead to fighting.

In response to Knox's attack against women rulers, Calvin wrote a letter to Cecil, who was Elizabeth's ambassador. Calvin wanted to be on good terms with Elizabeth. He wrote the letter to state that he opposed Knox on the issue. The letter says, "Two years ago John Knox asked me in a private conversation what I thought about the government of women. I candidly replied that occasionally women are so endowed that the singular good qualities which shone forth in them made it evident that they were raised up by divine authority." He was saying, even though it may not be the regular pattern, it is not something that we should fight against. He also said, "God either designed by such examples to condemn the inactivity of men or for the better setting forth of His own glory. I brought forth to John Knox the Old Testament examples of Huldah and Deborah." Deborah is well known, but I must admit that the first time I read this I was not sure who Huldah was. It shows how much John Calvin knew about the Bible that he could find the example of this woman in 2 Kings 22:14 who was a prophetess and a contemporary of Jeremiah and Zephaniah. He was able to include her alongside of Deborah as an example of God using women in places of authority. Calvin also said, "I came to this conclusion, that since by custom, public consent, and long practice it has been established that realms and principalities may descend to females by hereditary right [which was true of the two Maries], it did not appear to me necessary to move the question, not only because the thing would be invidious, but because in my opinion it would not be lawful to unsettle governments which are ordained by the peculiar providence of God." Calvin continued with this view even though Huguenots in France were being killed. In effect, Calvin says it is better to die than to form a revolution.