



John Knox

c. 1513 – 1572

“God is my witness, that I never preached Christ Jesus in contempt of any man,” declared John Knox at the height of his struggle against all manner of tyranny and corruption. He had been accused of disdainful opponents when in fact he simply feared none of them. He could have been afraid. When Knox was only fifteen Patrick Hamilton, a young scholar newly enthralled by Luther, had been burned at the stake. Knox would never forget.

John was born in a village a few miles outside Edinburgh. Rough-hewn all his life, he never apologized for his rustic origins even as providence pushed him among the high-born of his era. He loathed the intrigues of the courts, despising their scheming, their manipulations and their influence-trading; his unselfconscious transparency would never be able to endure cultivated murkiness in others.

Knox’s early life unfolded in a church whose corruption and avarice were the worst in Christendom. (In Scotland the church had accumulated half of the country’s wealth.) Upon leaving St. Andrews’s University Knox was ordained priest, then assigned not to a parish but to the legal department of the ecclesiastical bureaucracy. Gradually he lost interest in the abstract disputes of many mediaeval thinkers at the same time as he found himself electrified by the Church Fathers. Augustine and Jerome in particular introduced him to the grand themes of scripture: grace, faith, sin, justification, providence. For the rest of his life his favourite passage would be John 17

where Jesus, on the eve of his betrayal and death, prays for those the Father has given him; and prays specifically that they will be sustained throughout the torments soon to be visited on them—as on godly people of any era.

Soon Knox was preaching in the fearless style that would endear him to his followers for ever. On Easter, 1547, he preached at St. Andrew's castle, flaying the garrison there for its degradation—and was startled at being called as the congregation's pastor!

But it was not to last long. Two months later twenty-one French galleys bombarded the castle furiously. Already weakened by plague, the garrison surrendered. The men—Knox included—were chained to rowing benches and whipped to greater exertion by day; by night they huddled under the benches, wolfing down bean porridge and horse-meat. The king of France, assuming he could now use Scotland as a base for attacking England, assumed as well that a patriot and leader like Knox would help him do this. He released the Scot after nineteen months of agony.

The Frenchman had miscalculated; the Scot was anything but anti-English. Soon Knox was in England preaching to the thriving congregation he had gathered. Here the English Reformers drew on his gifts in theology and liturgy, incorporating his work in the Anglican prayer-book.

Then Mary I succeeded the late Edward VI. In four years "Bloody" Mary would engineer the horrible deaths of 300 men and women. Knox had to leave England immediately. He moved to Geneva, and daily gained from his friend John Calvin the theological equipment he had to have for the final spiritual assault on his homeland.

His sojourns in Geneva were the happiest periods of his life. He preached three times per week to an English congregation, was given long hours for study, and immersed himself in Hebrew and Greek. At the same time he knew that Geneva was gospel-infused while Edinburgh was not. When three Scottish nobles wrote him, pleading with him to return, he could not decline.

Before leaving Geneva for the last time he published his tract, *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*. The "regiment" consisted of two: "Bloody" Mary, who had done her utmost to bury his work in England, and Scotland's Mary of Guise,

soon to give way to her daughter, Mary Queen of Scots. The “Blast” was no firecracker. The penalty for possessing a copy of it, or for failing to destroy a copy that found its way into one’s hands, was death.

Fearing that Mary of Guise had heartlessly sacrificed Scotland to France (or at least had tried to), the Scottish nobles deposed her. With Mary out of the way the Reformers’ situation appeared to improve. Knox and his fellow-strugglers now had the breathing space required to write the Scots Confession of Faith. Alongside it provisions were made for each pastor in the Kirk to be paid a stipend, large enough to support spouse and children and render unnecessary the distraction of a second job. All of Scotland was to be divided into self-supporting parishes, with a parish-supported school in each. Here there was bred the Scots’ reputation for their veneration of education, their repugnance at tyranny, their insistence on democracy, and their love of literature.

Mary Queen of Scots was soon monarch. She brought Knox to trial, laughing all the while. “Do you know what I am laughing at?”, she asked the nobles around her. “That man once made me weep. . . . I will see if I can make him weep.” She could not. When she asked the nobles to render a verdict they acquitted Knox—unanimously! Enraged, she demanded another vote. The result was identical.

Mary was soon weeping herself. Her husband having been murdered, she quickly married the murderer! Scottish nobles, disgusted now, seized her and carried her to Edinburgh while crowds in the streets shouted, “Burn the whore!” Elizabeth I, never one to suffer fools, had her beheaded.

Knox’s remaining years were difficult. Slander surrounded him. He was said to have bedded his mother-in-law and his stepmother as well. The slander continued for fifty years, becoming increasingly ridiculous; it was said that he committed incest, when the date of the supposed deed was twenty years after Knox had died.

The thundering voice could only whisper now. As death moved closer he had his wife read and re-read his favourite scripture passages, always concluding with John 17, “the place where I cast my first anchor.” At the grave a mourner remarked, “Here lies one who neither flattered nor feared any flesh.”

