

## **WHO WAS JOHN KNOX?**

**Francis Coxon\***

It has ever been according to the economy of God to raise up men of His own choice to declare His will at different periods of history. Today there seems to be a dearth of such characters. There is no one in high places who has spiritual vision coupled with holy boldness, to declare the message from God so sadly needed. "Help, LORD; for the godly man ceaseth; for the faithful fail from among the children of men. They speak vanity every one with his neighbour: with flattering lips and with a double heart do they speak" (Psalm 12:1-2).

It is refreshing to consider what God wrought through His servant, John Knox, in the sixteenth century. The character of John Knox as a reformer had many distinctive features.

### **His Belief in the Supremacy of Holy Scripture in All Matters of Faith and Practice**

Although ordained a Romish priest previous to 1530, he is found embracing scriptural truth by 1535. The writings of Jerome and Augustine attracted his particular attention. By the works of the former, he was led to the Scriptures as the only pure fountain of divine truth, and instructed in the utility of studying them in the original languages.

God was leading Knox to a fuller and more comprehensive view of the system of evangelical doctrine, and it appears that he professed himself a Protestant before the year 1542. Knox himself gives counsel as follows: "I have thought good to communicate with you in these few lines my weak counsel, how I would ye should behave yourselves in the midst of this wicked generation touching the exercise of God's most holy and sacred word, without the which, neither shall knowledge increase, godliness appear, nor fervency continue among you. For as the word of God is the beginning of life spiritual, without which all flesh is dead in God's presence; and the lantern to our feet, without the brightness whereof all the posterity of Adam doth walk in darkness; and as it is the foundation of faith, without the which no man understandeth the good will of God; so is it also the only organ and instrument

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which God useth to strengthen the weak, to comfort the afflicted, to reduce to mercy by repentance such as have slidden; and finally, to preserve and keep the very life of the soul, in all assaults and temptations." And again: "Dear brethren, I write my knowledge, and do speak my conscience, that so necessary as meat and drink are to the preservation of life corporal, and so necessary as the heat and brightness of the sun are to the quickening of the herbs and to expel darkness, so necessary is also to life everlasting, and to the illumination and light of the soul, the perpetual meditation, exercise, and use of God's holy word."

As Knox said to his wife long after on his deathbed: "Go, read where I cast my first anchor;" upon which she read the 17th chapter of John's gospel. The anchor of his soul had found security and salvation from the light of God's word. Hence transformation from Popery to Protestantism.

### **His Fear of God Coupled with His Fearlessness of Man**

At Knox's funeral, the regent, Morton, pronounced the memorable words: "There lies he who never feared the face of man." The secret of his fearlessness of man lay in his fear of God. "It shall be well with them that fear God" (Ecclesiastes 8:12), and "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" (Psalm 27:1). Knox bore a striking resemblance to Luther in personal intrepidity and in popular eloquence. Whether in the presence of the King, Queen or peasant, his witness for God's truth remained steadfast. To quote from M'Crie's *Life of Knox*: "During the time that Knox was in London (in the reign of Edward VI) he had full opportunity for observing the state of the court ... the royal chaplains were men of a very different character from those who have usually occupied that place in the courts of princes. They were no time-serving, supple, smooth-tongued parasites; they were not afraid of forfeiting their pensions, or of alarming the consciences, and wounding the delicate ears, of their royal and noble auditors, by denouncing the vices which they committed, and the judgments of Heaven to which they exposed themselves." The sermons delivered by Knox at court were not less free and bold than those of his colleagues. The following is part of the conversation which took place in the first interview between Knox and Queen Mary: "I will defend the Church of Rome," said the Queen, "for it is, I think, the true Church of God." "Your will, madam, is no reason, neither doth your *thought* make the Roman harlot to be the true and immaculate spouse of Jesus

Christ. Wonder not, madam, that I call Rome an harlot, for that church is altogether polluted with all kinds of spiritual fornication, both in doctrine and manners." "You interpret the Scriptures in one way," said the Queen evasively, "and they in another; whom shall I believe and who shall be judge?" "You shall believe God, who plainly speaketh in His word," replied the Reformer; "and farther than the word teacheth you, you shall believe neither the one nor the other. The word of God is plain in itself; and if there be any obscurity in one place, the Holy Ghost, who is never contrary to Himself, explains the same more clearly in other places, so that there can remain no doubt, but unto such as are obstinately ignorant."

An extract from a letter written by Knox to the same Queen reads: "If your Grace shall consider, that either you must serve God to life everlasting, or else serve the world to death and damnation, then, albeit that man and angel should dissuade you, you will choose life, and refuse death. And if further you shall consider, that the very life consisteth in the knowledge of the only true God and of His Son, Christ Jesus."

Knox was a man of fervent prayer. Mary Queen of Scots said: "I fear John Knox's prayers more than an army of ten thousand men." In a treatise on prayer, Knox wrote: "Prayer springeth out of true faith (Romans 10). How necessary is the right invocation to God's name (otherwise called perfect prayer) it becometh no Christian to misknow, seeing it is the very branch which springeth forth of true faith: whereof if any man be destitute, notwithstanding he be endowed with whatsoever virtues, yet in the presence of God is he reputed for no Christian at all. Therefore a manifest sign it is, that such as in prayer always are negligent, do understand nothing of perfect faith. For if the fire be without heat, or the burning lamp without light, then true faith may be without fervent prayer."

### **His Uncompromising Resistance to that which is Unscriptural, and His Abhorrence of Idolatry**

During his confinement to the French galleys, whence he toiled at the oar under the lash for nineteen weary months, one incident is worthy of note. When the master of the galley *Notre Dame* insisted that the chained prisoner should kiss a carved image of the Virgin, whose name the vessel bore, he flung the intrusive idol into the Loire, saying, "She is light enough, let her learn to swim"!

On the arrival of Queen Mary in Scotland in 1561, the Mass was restored in Holyrood House on the first Sabbath after her arrival. Knox exposed the evils of idolatry on the following Sabbath, concluding his sermon by saying that "one Mass was more fearful to him, than if ten thousand armed enemies were landed in one part of the realm, of purpose to suppress the whole religion."

It was chiefly by the magnificence of its temples, and the gorgeous apparatus of its worship, that the popish system fascinated the senses and imaginations of the people. A more successful method of attacking it, therefore, could not be adopted than the demolition of what contributed so much to uphold and extend its influence. There is more wisdom than many perceive in the maxim which Knox is said to have inculcated, that "the best way to keep the rooks from returning was to pull down their nests."

In demolishing, or rendering uninhabitable, all those buildings which had served for the maintenance of the old superstition (except what were requisite for Protestant worship), the Reformers only acted upon the principles of a prudent general who dismantles or razes the fortifications which he is unable to keep, and which might afterwards be seized and employed against him by the enemy.

Of Knox and his times, J A Froude writes as follows: "It is as we look back over that stormy time, and weigh the actors in it one against the other, that he stands out in his full proportions. No grander figure can be found in the entire history of the Reformation in this island than that of Knox. The time has come when English history may do justice to one but for whom the Reformation would have been overthrown among ourselves; for the spirit which Knox created saved Scotland; and if Scotland had been Romanist again, neither the wisdom of Elizabeth's ministers, nor the teaching of her bishops, nor her own chicaneries, would have preserved England from revolution. His was the voice which taught the peasant of the Lothians that he was a free man, the equal in the sight of God with the proudest peer or prelate that had trampled on his forefathers. The change of times has brought with it the toleration which Knox denounced, and has established the compromises which Knox most feared and abhorred ... But the Papists which Knox grappled with and overthrew - the Papists of Philip II, of Mary Tudor, and Pius V - were not the mild, forbearing innocents into which the success of the Reformation has

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and believe. The truth of election and reprobation does not give anyone the right to make judgments as to who is elect and who is reprobate. That is blasphemy. All the pastor and missionary must do is preach the whole counsel of God, resting in the fact that the Lord will use the means of the preaching to draw to Himself all He has chosen, and that God will use the means of the same preaching to be "justly terrible to those, who ... have wholly given themselves up to the cares of the world, and the pleasures of the flesh, so long as they are not seriously converted to God" (Canons 1:16) The twofold test for proper preaching of predestination is whether it glorifies God and whether it comforts the believing sinner.

The preaching of election is a source of "unspeakable consolation" (Canons 1:6) in the mission field as much as in the established congregation. The elect are taught they can gain the assurance of their "unchangeable election, not by inquisitively prying into the secret and deep things of God, but by observing in themselves ... the infallible fruits of election pointed out in the Word of God – such as a true faith in Christ, filial fear, a godly sorrow for sin, a hungering and thirsting after righteousness, etc" (Canons 1:12). This sense of election gives believers only more reason for humiliation before God, "for adoring the depth of his mercies, for cleansing themselves, and rendering grateful returns of ardent love to him, who first manifested so great love towards them" (Canons 1:13). The proper preaching of election warns against carnal security and against any laziness toward responsibilities. The preaching of predestination does not prevent anyone from coming to Christ. Further, those who wish a greater assurance of election must not be alarmed at the mention of reprobation but must persist in the use of the means which God has appointed for the working of this assurance and wait prayerfully for a season of richer grace.

The truth of election gives every preacher, whether pastor or missionary, the assurance that his efforts are not in vain. This assurance arises from believing that God has elected some and that it is His good pleasure to send others to hell in order to show "his wrath, and to make his power known" (Romans 9:22). We do not need to feel guilty if all do not respond favourably to the preaching. The assurance of the preacher that his efforts are not in vain arises from believing that the dispensing of salvation is in the hands of the Holy Spirit who calls, through the preaching, those whom God has predestinated. In God we cannot be defeated