

John Knox

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Among the bright ornaments of the Church of Christ in the world, none can claim a higher place than John Knox, the Scottish Reformer, and certainly none suffered more of the enmity of the world, both in his life and after his death. There were none in Scotland who did more for the Cause of Christ, and it may safely be questioned if any did as much, and certainly he was exempt from the woe of those of whom all men speak well.

The subject of this short sketch was born “of honest parents” at Giffordgate near Haddington. The date of his birth is believed to be 1513 or 1514, and not 1505 as stated by Dr. McCrie in his excellent Life of Knox. His earlier years are shrouded in mystery, but it can safely be stated that he was brought up in the Church of Rome and taught early to pay homage to her superstitious worship.

His parents, although not rich as far as this world's goods are concerned, were able to give their son a liberal education, and sent him, first of all, to the Grammar School of Haddington, after which he matriculated in the University of Glasgow, and studied under John Major, who appears to have been at one time a Professor in the University of Paris, where he acquired views that were more liberal than those professed in his native country.

Knox taught philosophy as one of the regents of the University, and ultimately was advanced to clerical orders and was ordained a priest. His enquiring mind led him to study the Scriptures which were able to make him wise unto salvation. The work seems to have been gradual for he did not publicly profess the Reformed faith till about the year 1542. This was, for him, the beginning of times of struggles and dangers, and his enemies would no doubt have accomplished their aim to murder him were it not that the Lord brought him under the protection of Douglas of Longniddry, who engaged him as tutor to his two sons.

This was the time when he came into contact with George Wishart, the famous preacher and martyr, in whose company he was found when the latter was arrested. He had thoughts of flight from Scotland but was prevailed upon to seek refuge, with his pupils, in the Castle of St. Andrews, which had been seized by those who conspired against Cardinal Beaton. It was here, on the Call

of the congregation, that he began publicly to exercise his ministry. Through pressure from land and sea, the castle capitulated and the residents were carried prisoners to France, where Knox served as a galley slave, chained to an oar, and with some of his fellow-prisoners suffered all the indignities with which Papists were accustomed to treat those whom they regarded as heretics.

It was in connection with these indignities that Knox relates an incident which, though he does not mention himself, it is highly probable that he was the actor, and it shows his integrity in dangerous circumstances. "One day a fine painted image of the Virgin was brought into one of the galleys, and a Scottish prisoner was desired to give it the kiss of adoration. He replied, saying that such idols were accursed, and he would not touch it. 'But you shall,' replied one of the officers roughly, at the same time forcing it towards his mouth. Upon this the prisoner seized the image and, throwing it into the river, said 'Let the lady now save herself: she is light enough, let her learn to swim.' The officers with difficulty saved their goddess from the waves; and the prisoners were relieved for the future from such troublesome importunities."

He was confined a prisoner in the galleys for nineteen months, where he suffered much from privation and ill-health. It was during this captivity that he expressed his conviction that as God had first opened his mouth to his glory in St. Andrews, He would do so yet in the same place, which certainly came to pass, though at the time he uttered it there appeared no prospects of his words being accomplished.

After his release he preached with much success in Berwick, and in various parts of England, in the midst of persecutions and intrigues by his enemies. On being, on one occasion, falsely accused by his enemies he was cited to London, but the Council, being satisfied with his defence, and being convinced of the malice of his accusers, gave him an honourable acquittal, manifesting that the intrigues of his enemies were to the confusion of Satan and the glory of God. After being absent from London for some time he returned, and Archbishop Cranmer was directed by the Council, with the approval of King Edward VI, to present him with the living of All-Hallows, which he refused owing to the present state of the Church of England. "His refusal, and the reason for it, gave offence, and he was summoned before the Privy Council, but he defended himself and his scruples with an independence which is the fruit of the work of the Spirit in the soul.

Afterwards Edward VI offered him a bishopric, with the same result, stating frankly that he believed that the Episcopal office was destitute of Scriptural warrant. Shortly after this King Edward died and Queen Mary, a bigoted Papist, ascended the throne, and Knox found himself out with the protection of the law. He took ship from England, landing safely at Dieppe on 20th January, 1554.

From Dieppe he travelled through France to Switzerland, where he was cordially received by friends of the Reformation. He made many journeys during his time in Switzerland to Dieppe to get information as to the progress of events in England, so that he was well posted as to the persecution of Protestants there. At Geneva, he made the acquaintance of John Calvin, then in the zenith of his reputation and usefulness. An attempt was made to settle Knox as one of the pastors of the English congregation of Frankfort, but owing to the troubles raised by sticklers for the English Service Book, the attempt proved abortive and Knox returned to Geneva.

In August, 1555, Knox left Geneva for Dieppe from which port he sailed for Scotland, landing near Berwick, to which town he repaired to join his wife and mother. After some time, he left for Edinburgh, where he met with, and preached to, increasing congregations, and caused a formal separation between the Popish Church and the friends of the Reformation. This public preaching of the gospel aroused the apprehension and the ire of the Popish clergy, and they summoned Knox to appear before a convocation of the clergy in the Church of the Blackfriars at Edinburgh.

When they learned that he purposed to appear they deserted the diet against him, so that on the very day that he was to appear as a culprit he was preaching the gospel publicly to a much larger audience than he had ever before addressed in his native country. In July, 1556, he left Scotland for Geneva after receiving word from the English congregation there that he had, been appointed as one of their pastors. The Romish clergy were no sooner aware of his absence than they renewed their summons, against him and, not having appeared, they condemned "his body to the flames, and his soul to damnation," and caused his effigy to be burned at the cross of Edinburgh. Knox's visit to Scotland at this time was the means of greatly strengthening the Reformed cause.

Three years later Knox returned to Scotland and found matters in a critical state as far as the Reformation was concerned. The Queen-Mother, who was Regent, had avowed her determination to suppress the Reformation, and took

strong measures, to carry out that determination. A provincial council was convened by the Queen-Regent and the Popish Bishops, and met in the monastery of the Greyfriars, Edinburgh, to deliberate on the steps to be taken to suppress the reformers. During the proceedings a messenger came in who informed them that John Knox had arrived in Scotland and slept last night in Edinburgh. The clergy were panic-stricken and the council was dismissed without doing anything. The presence of such an able champion of the Reformed faith greatly strengthened the Protestants.

The result which followed was that the Protestant worship was set up in various places such as St. Andrews, Crail, Cupar, Lindores, Stirling and Edinburgh. On the 7th July, 1559, the inhabitants of Edinburgh met in the Tolbooth and elected John Knox as their minister, and with this election he deemed it his duty to comply. Soon after this, eight other towns in Scotland were provided with Protestant ministers, and more places would have been provided for were it not for the scarcity of ministers.

Knox, being the central figure of the Reformation in Scotland, was in extreme danger. A reward was publicly offered to any who should apprehend or kill him; and not a few lay in wait to seize his person. In spite of this he was always at the point of danger, and spent his time in preaching during the day, and writing letters at night in connection with the Cause of Christ. Matters at last came to a climax and the Queen-Regent was removed from her place of authority and a council was appointed to rule the Kingdom until a free Parliament met.

When a free Parliament met, it required the ministers to furnish it with a summary of doctrine which they could prove to be in accordance with the Scriptures, and which they desired to be established. The ministers were not unprepared for this, and in four days they produced a Confession of Faith, which was in accordance with the Confessions of other reformed Churches. It was the joint production of Knox and other three ministers, and was received by Parliament. They were afterwards instructed to prepare a book of church polity which they did in a very short time. It is known as the *First Book of Discipline*.

Thus, we find that in 1560 the Roman Catholic religion was overthrown in Scotland and the Reformed faith established in its place, with its Confession of Faith and Book of Church Polity, and all this under the leadership of John Knox in the face of strong opposition. After this the first General Assembly met on

20th December, 1560. It was at the close of this year that Knox suffered a heavy domestic loss in the removal of his wife to whom he was greatly attached.

In 1561, Mary Queen of Scots, arrived in Scotland and assumed the reins of government into her own hands. Being a bigoted Papist, like her mother and her uncles, her main endeavours throughout life were to establish the Roman Catholic religion and to overthrow Protestantism. Knox being looked upon as the leader of the Reformers, it was natural that he should receive much of the hatred of the Queen and her flatterers, but he was unaffected by either the flattery or the rage of the Queen. It would lengthen this imperfect sketch beyond all reasonable bounds to give examples of the interviews between her and Knox; suffice it to say that he stood his ground and that he persevered to the end in his faithfulness to the Cause of Christ.

At last, the strain of all his labours began to tell on the Reformer's health, and by 1571 it was apparent that he was in a dying condition. A colleague and successor, in the person of John Lawson, was appointed, and was installed in St. Giles on 9th November, 1572, and John Knox preached the sermon on this occasion. This was his last public appearance. On 24th November, 1572, he passed away to be forever with the Lord. On 26th November he was buried in the Churchyard of St. Giles, in the presence of a large concourse of people, and of all the nobility of the city. When his body was laid in the grave, the Regent Morton pronounced his eulogium in the well-known and well-deserved words, "There lies the he who never feared the face of man."

The late Rev. Thomas McCrie, D.D., said of him, "Few men were ever exposed to more dangers, or underwent greater hard-ships. From the time that he embraced the reformed religion till he breathed his last, seldom did he enjoy a respite from trouble; and he emerged from one scene of difficulty and danger only to be involved in another still more distressing. Obligated to flee from St. Andrews to escape the fury of Cardinal Beaton, he found a retreat in East Lothian, from which he was hunted, by Archbishop Hamilton. He lived for several years as an outlaw, in daily apprehension of falling a prey to those who eagerly sought his life. The few months during which he enjoyed protection in the castle of St. Andrew's were succeeded by a long and rigorous captivity.

After enjoying some repose in England, he was again driven into banishment, and for five years wandered as an exile on the Continent. When he returned to his native country it was to engage in a struggle of the most perilous and arduous kind. After the Reformation was established, and he was settled in the

capital, he was involved in a continual contest with the court. When he was relieved from this warfare, and thought only of ending his days in peace, he was again called into the field; and, although scarcely able to walk, was obliged to remove from his flock, and to avoid the fury of his enemies by submitting to a new banishment. He was repeatedly condemned for heresy, and proclaimed an outlaw; thrice he was accused of high treason, and on two of these occasions he appeared and underwent a trial.

A price was publicly set on his head; assassins were employed to kill him; and his life was attempted, both with the pistol and the dagger. Yet he escaped all these perils, and finished his course in peace and in honour. No wonder that he was weary of the world, and anxious to depart; and with great propriety might it be said at his decease that 'he rested from his labours.'"

- *Life of Knox (Ter-centenary Edition, p. 277).*