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John Knox: founding father of the Church of Scotland

Learning from a Hard Knox Life

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Historians are not certain whether it was 1514 or 1515, but sometime around there, in the little market town of Haddington, Scotland, down the street from St Mary's Church, John Knox was born.

As biographer Rosalind Marshall explains, much of Knox's early life is unknown. He doesn't enter the history books until his thirties, and what little we know about his life before then comes from pieces left for us by his contemporaries.

For example, it's believed that he attended St Andrews University and flourished in his studies, though there's no evidence for it other than the word of Theodore Beza, his contemporary. Beza considered him a distinguished academician, and others called him "Mr. Knox" – a title reserved for those who held degrees. He likely spent some time as a country lawyer too, but no one is sure.

The first we really know of Knox is when he stormed onto the scene during some of the most tumultuous years of Scotland's history. Knox had become a Protestant, joining the band of George Wishart, a Protestant leader and Knox's mentor who was later burned at the stake for his teaching. It is noted that when Wishart travelled to speak, Knox would lead the way *carrying a large two-handed sword*. He did things like carry swords, and more – things that would make many of us scratch our heads today. Part of it was the time in which he lived, and part of it was the

plain fact that he wasn't a likable man, at least not by how others perceived him.

Enough with Kneeling at the Table

Like the time he had the rare opportunity to preach before Edward VI, King of England, and attacked the practice of kneeling during communion. The context around this sermon was a fresh Protestant influence in the church's liturgy. Archbishop Thomas Cranmer had just published a new prayer book, the Second Book of Common Prayer, because the first book was rejected for seeming too Roman Catholic. The Second Book, which further distanced Protestant practice from Roman Catholicism, was the only legal manual of worship in the Church of England, but Knox hated it for instructing people to receive the bread and wine from their knees. He insisted that no case could be made for it in Scripture. He had the audience of the king, mind you, and he preached on kneeling.

The Blast of Hot Air

Or there's the time he wrote *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*. The premise of the tract was that women should not be rulers, and there was more than one good reason for his argument. Mary the First had taken over the throne in England after Edward VI's untimely death. She was a devoted Roman Catholic, and whatever Protestant gains England had made on Edward's watch, she was set to reverse them. She was entering the fifth year of her reign when Knox published *The First Blast*, and by the time she died in November, 1558, she had murdered close to 300 Protestants. Bloody Mary was a Jezebel, and Knox wanted to discredit her right to rule – we understand this part. But it was his rhetoric. In his efforts to defeat her tyranny, he said some unkind things about women in general, such as, "Nature, I say, doth paint [women] forth to be weak, frail, impatient, feeble and foolish, and experience hath declared them to be inconstant, variable, cruel and lacking the spirit of counsel and regiment. And these notable faults have men in all ages espied."

That argument just doesn't hold (God did make women mothers, after all!). It's no surprise that his bombastic tract didn't go well, neither with Mary nor her Protestant sister, later Queen Elizabeth, nor with the female monarchs in Scotland, Mary of Guise and her daughter, Mary Queen of Scots. He was surrounded by women rulers – and he wrote *that*.

According to Marshall, this piece is no less unpopular in Scotland today, giving Knox the public reputation as the country's "first and most vituperative male chauvinist."

Making the Monarch Cry

Then, of course, there is that time he met with Mary, Queen of Scots, and made her cry. After her mother, Mary of Guise, had died, Scotland's Parliament made the nation Protestant. Mary Queen of Scots had been raised in Catholic France and returned as the rightful monarch of Scotland, though young and widowed. Some thought she would convert to Protestantism; others, namely Knox, worried she would marry a Spanish Catholic, reverse the Protestant progress, and eventually repeat the vicious reign of Bloody Mary in England. He publicly criticized the rumoured marriage plans, and was therefore summoned to meet with her.

As the account goes, she was furious when she saw him and vented, "I cannot be quit of you. I avow to God, I shall be once revenged." But then she burst into hysterical tears. This eighteen-year-old queen, in the presence of late-forties Knox, wept so long and so loudly that her page boy ran to find her some handkerchiefs. It was awkward, to say the least, as Knox stood waiting for her to finish. Once she calmed down he said a few more words, concluding, "I am no master of myself, but must obey him who commands me to speak plain and to flatter no flesh upon the face of the earth."

But then it got worse. After another short interchange, Mary Queen of Scots broke down again. She sobbed violently, and was even approached by others nearby to comfort her. Knox recounted the story, saying that he had to wait another long season in her presence as she tried to get herself together. She soon was angry enough to send him away to wait in her outer chamber. Knox reportedly waited there for nearly an hour, standing uncomfortably in silence with a few others until he told a group of fashionably clad ladies they were going to die and be eaten by worms. Looking at them, in his words, he said, "Fie upon the knave Death!...The foul worms will be busy with this flesh, be it never so fair and so tender."

Fearless Knox

There are these examples and countless others when Knox infuriated people. He angered Catholics and Protestants, men and women, rich and poor. It seems that everyone who knew him, at least at some point, didn't like him. That is not an overstatement. The most amazing thing about it all, though, is that Knox didn't care.

It is almost make-believe how ruthlessly undaunted he lived his life. He believed that God called him to preach the truth, and that is pretty much exclusively what he did. Going against the grain of a culture consumed with classes and flattery, Knox just told it like it is. Marshall writes, "Knox was convinced that as a preacher of the Word of God he was sent to offer spiritual guidance to everyone, regardless of how eminent they might be." He was like an Old Testament prophet.

While I don't think modern church leaders should pattern their speech after his, and while many actions in his life might not be worth imitating, it is his fearlessness that demands our attention.

Knox embodied a reality that many of us share, but too many of us fail to remember in adversity.

Amazing is not what he said when he said it, but *the courage* that caused him to speak. John Knox really believed that he would never die (John 11:26), and that his momentary afflictions were preparing him for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison (2 Corinthians 4:17), and that if he tried to please man, he would not be a servant of Christ (Galatians 1:10).

He embodied a reality that many of us share, but too many of us fail to remember in adversity. If we are united to the preeminent Son of God, and we are filled with the eternal Spirit of God, and we are irreversibly declared *righteous* and a *child* by God the Father, we are untouchable. We will inherit the world, you know (Matthew 5:5). We will judge angels (1 Corinthians 6:3). God knows how many hairs we have on our heads (Matthew 10:30), and more than that, he works every little thing that comes into our lives toward our transformation into the image of Jesus (Romans 8:28). And will we be afraid? Seriously? What can mere flesh do to us (Psalm 56:4)?

We all "know" this, but John Knox took it to the bank every day. He lived like it were true, because, after all, *it is*.



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