

# John Knox and the Revival in Scotland

by James Burns

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*John Knox was a key leader in the Reformation in Scotland, preaching and advocating for the Protestant faith, and eventually becoming the real ruler of Scotland during this period.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 23:4, Isaiah 61:1, Matthew 5:10, Romans 8:18, 1 Corinthians 1:27, 2 Corinthians 4:8, Philippians 1:20, 2 Timothy 1:7, Hebrews 10:35, Revelation 2:10

**Topics:** "Church History", "Reformation Movement"

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## Description

James Burns preaches about the challenging and corrupt conditions in Scotland at the beginning of the sixteenth century, where the people were oppressed by poverty, ignorance, and spiritual bondage under a corrupt state church. John Knox, born in this tumultuous time, eventually embraced the Protestant faith and became a pivotal figure in the Reformation movement in Scotland, facing persecution and imprisonment for his beliefs. Despite enduring great suffering, Knox's unwavering courage and dedication to preaching the gospel led to the growth of the Reformed faith in Scotland, culminating in the abolition of Roman Catholicism and the establishment of the Church of Scotland.

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## Transcript

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Scotland was one of the poorest countries in Europe. The towns were few, thinly populated, and wretchedly built, while the people were sunk in degrading poverty and the grossest ignorance. The feudal system, which elsewhere had broken down because of population growth, was still supreme. The country was composed of three orders--the clergy, the nobility, and the people. The people existed merely as the vassals of the baron. He protected them, and in return they tilled his land, fought his battles, and in all the other relations of life acknowledged themselves as his serfs.

In spiritual affairs a like condition prevailed. The people were the serfs of their ecclesiastical superiors. They were sunk in superstition and in the most slavish obedience. Independence, as we know the term, was not known, and the people were enslaved both in body and mind.

### Religious Conditions

The state church in Scotland was overwhelmingly corrupt. While the people were held down in debasing poverty, the clergy were everywhere bent on amassing wealth. Half the wealth of the country was in their hands. They never condescended to preach, and were too ignorant to have done so if they chose. The bishop of Dunkeld, who "thanked God that he knew neither the Old nor the New Testament," was typical

of his class.

In addition, the lives of the clergy were scandalous, with many of them living in open immorality. The people perished through lack of knowledge. The few sacred services that were conducted were presented in a language that the people could not understand and that many of the priests could not even correctly read. The country swarmed with ignorant and idle monks who used their power to rob the poor of the necessities of life. Not content with this, some of them even forced themselves into the chambers of the dying to extort bequests, disturbing people's last moments by their greed.

It was in the midst of these national crises that John Knox was born in the town of Haddington in the year 1505. Haddington possessed one of the few schools in Scotland that could offer its students anything approaching what might be called a liberal education. Knox attended this school until the age of seventeen, when he entered the University of Glasgow. Other than this, little is known about his early years.

Unlike the other Reformers, Knox reached middle age before he embraced the Protestant faith. Doubtless his mind had been moving toward change for a long time, but he was forty years old before he definitely detached himself from the existing church. This decision came primarily because of the influence of George Wishart, one of the forerunners of Protestantism in Scotland.

Wishart's message found an echo in Knox's heart, and a warm affection sprang up between the two men. Knox followed him everywhere, bearing before him, it is said, a huge double-edged sword that he was prepared to use in defense of his friend. Wishart, however, was not destined to see the harvest of his labors. The emissaries of the wily Cardinal Beaton were dogging his footsteps. He was apprehended, put on trial, condemned, and burned at the stake. Knox was eager to accompany him, but the remonstrance of Wishart is well known. "Nay," said he, "return to your bairns. One is sufficient for a sacrifice."

Knox's well-known sympathy with Wishart's views made him a marked man, and after being pursued from one place to another, he at length fled to the Castle of St. Andrews, where leaders of the Reformed movement were gathering.

### Knox's Call

The heroic character of Knox soon became apparent in the turbulent days that ensued. In the castle, filled with desperate outlaws and ardent Reformers, a man was needed to publicly defend the stand many of them were making for freedom. They had listened to Knox as he instructed his pupils, and being struck with his intense earnestness and with his knowledge of Scripture, they formed a resolution to appoint him as their minister.

The call itself came with dramatic suddenness and was totally unexpected by Knox. Sitting one day in the public preaching place listening to a discourse on the ministerial office, he was startled when the preacher directed his address to Knox personally. He pointed out the needs of the times, the call for service, and Knox's own qualifications for the office. Then turning to the congregation, he asked them to ratify what he had said. This they solemnly did, with one voice calling Knox to exercise the office of minister in their midst.

The effect upon Knox was overwhelming. He could not shake off the call nor treat it lightly. He heard in it the voice of God, but his spirit, which knew no other fear, trembled under the weight of the responsibility.

Bursting into tears, he rushed from the place, and only after a prolonged struggle did he accept the task. Once he accepted it, however, there was for him no turning back. With his usual intrepidity and vehemence of character, he flung himself into the fight.

His first sermon preached in the parish church drew a great crowd, among whom were not only the chief men of the city but also many monks and priests who watched over the perishing interests of their church. Knox's sermon, which exhibited even at that early date his vast powers, caused an immense sensation. "Some hew at the branches of papacy," men said, "but this man strikes at the root." Under Knox's ministrations, the Reformed faith quickly began to grow, the first visible signs of it being a Communion service after the Reformed manner that Knox presided over in the parish church. At this service--the first of its kind held in Scotland--Knox dispensed the sacrament to over two hundred people. It was a small number, but it revealed better than anything else the change that was coming over Scotland.

The garrison of St. Andrew was practically in a stage of siege at this time. While the Protestants were waiting for help from England, the French fleet assaulted the castle. On the last day of July 1547, the garrison surrendered to the French admiral upon his promise that they would be taken to France and allowed their liberty. But a promise to "heretics" imposed no burden upon the conscience, according to the French code of honor, so the chief prisoners were cast into French dungeons, while the rest--with Knox among them--were sent to the slave galleys.

For nineteen months, Knox was chained to an oar, and his sufferings were so great that he never afterward cared to recall them. His health was permanently damaged and he contracted a painful disease that never left him without suffering. During this terrible time, however, his hope and courage remained undaunted. On one occasion, Knox's ship returned to Scotland. He was so sick that few hoped for his life, but the captain brought him on deck to look at the shores of his homeland. When asked if he recognized them, Knox answered, "Yes, I know it well, for I see the steeple of that place where God first opened my mouth in public to His glory; and I am fully persuaded, however weak I now appear, that I shall not depart this life till my tongue shall glorify His godly name in the same place."

Knox was not released until early in 1549. Scotland was then in so disturbed a state that nothing could be gained by his returning to it, and for the next ten years he lived in exile. The seeds of the Reformation, however, were continuing to grow up in Scotland and to bring forth fruit. A great awakening was taking place among the people, who were beginning to shake off their lethargy and to awake to a sense of their wrongs.

The queen of Scotland at this time was Mary of Guise, an implacable enemy of the Reformers. She issued a proclamation forbidding any Reformed minister to preach or administer the sacraments, and it seemed as if the whole movement were on the point of collapse. Urgent messages were sent to Knox in Geneva to return and assist the cause in his native land. Knox immediately complied, and in May of 1559 he arrived in Scotland. Entering the parish church of Perth, he preached an impassioned sermon to a huge congregation. His eloquence was so tempestuous that the whole congregation was roused to action. Before night fell, the churches were stormed and every vestige of "popery" was destroyed.

The queen threatened to visit this contempt of her authority with extreme penalties. However, a new spirit was breathing over Scotland. Beneath all the political unrest, a reviving breath of spiritual life was animating men's hearts. Serious men felt the glow of living conviction in the words of the Reformers. These men spoke with that unmistakable accent of authority that so deeply impresses the human heart

and that is ever present in times of spiritual awakenings.

The Protestant cause was thus gaining every day, and when Queen Mary arrived in Perth, the Reformed leaders were able to make an agreement with her. They agreed to disperse on condition that no one should suffer on account of the past and that all questions of religion should be considered by the next Parliament. Meanwhile, Knox was going from place to place carrying the fiery cross, preaching the gospel, and calling his countrymen to free themselves from the bondage imposed upon them by the priesthood.

In August 1569, Parliament met in Edinburgh and was found to be overwhelmingly Protestant. With almost incredible swiftness and unanimity, it declared for the Protestant faith and abolished Roman Catholicism in the land. Thus the old faith fell almost without striking a blow in its defense--a startling indication of how slight a hold it had obtained over the affections of the people, how unworthily it had maintained its high traditions, and how it had abused its power. In December of this same year, the first general assembly of the Church of Scotland was held, and the first chapter of the Protestant movement in Scotland was closed.

Throughout it all, one man soared high above all others. During the stormy days, it was Knox's voice that was heard. From the pulpit of St. Giles, he thundered forth his appeals and warnings, and such was the force of his personality that he may be fairly regarded as the real ruler of Scotland during this period. His convictions were maintained at white heat. His speech--rugged, impassioned, and majestic--swept away the timid opposition of other men. His sincerity and his utter fearlessness appealed even to his enemies, while his outstanding ability and knowledge of affairs made him an ally that no party in the state could afford to disdain.

These were years of anxiety and strenuous toil--years when, but for Knox's fearless character, the wheels might again and again have rolled backward and the work of the Reformers might have been undone. At length, broken down with the labors of his stormy life, the great Reformer felt that death was drawing nigh. On the ninth of November 1572, Knox preached for the last time in St. Giles. He was so feeble that he had to be helped into the pulpit, but once he was there, the old fire that had set Scotland in a glow broke out once more. The cathedral rang with his trumpet notes, and so vehemently did he preach that it seemed he would break the pulpit in pieces. When the sermon was ended, however, his strength was spent and the end was near.

His closing days were days of peace. The tempestuous spirit, so long intent on public affairs, withdrew itself into the inner chamber where peace abides and where vision takes the place of sight. Once, repeating the Lord's Prayer, he was heard to stop and to add with an awestruck whisper, "Who can pronounce so holy words?" His friends gathered around him. All the great men of the kingdom visited him as he lay weak and helpless, and he bade them a kind farewell.

A little after noon on Monday, November 24, he asked his wife to read to him part of the fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians, which he pronounced a "comfortable chapter," and later on, the fourteenth chapter of John, "where I cast my first anchor." Being asked if he heard, he answered, "I hear, and understand far better; I praise God." Soon after, the end came. He slipped away in the evening without a trace of pain.

On the Wednesday following, amid the grief of the whole populace, he was laid to rest in the shadow of that old cathedral that had so often run with his eloquence and that had been the scene of his greatest efforts. From the greatest to the lowliest in the land, it was recognized that there had passed away a great man, a true lover of his country, and a faithful follower of Jesus Christ.

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