

The Early Reformation in Scotland

By W. Duncan Rankin

INTRODUCTION

How deep the roots of the Reformation go into Scottish soil! Courageous believers in generations past—like Patrick Hamilton, George Wishart, and John Knox—stood for God, His Son, and His Word in that small yet influential land so profoundly shaped by the Reform movement. What a debt we in America even now owe: the lessons learned in that place and time still echo down through the years, teaching whoever will listen ageless truths of God and man. The purpose of this paper is to relate the impact of the early Scottish Reformation on the spheres of church doctrine, worship, and order. It is given in the hope that the glorification of God, love of His Son, and respect for His Word might once again flourish in our time.

Religion in Old Caledonia hardly began with the Reformation. As is the case with every human heart, the Britons, Angles, Scots and Picts who came to make up the nation of Scotland were born with a sense of the Transcendent both within them and without. Their vain attempts to answer the light of general revelation by dancing around the Callanish Standing Stones on Lewis or to respond to the *imago Dei* by ritual burial at Maes Howe and Skara Brae on Orkney did not go unanswered.

As related by Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*, when St. Columba traveled from Ireland in the mid 6th century to evangelize these heathen from his monastic base on the Isle of Iona, he did not seek to snuff out their darkened culture but rather to illumine it with gospel light. Centers of Christian learning and devotion were built across the land.¹ Standing stones became preaching crosses, complete with Celtic decoration! Pictish kings and princes soon came to serve the King of Kings, protecting missionaries in their realm. From tiny Iona, the gospel went forth first to Britain and eventually to

the world. Christianity made an impact in that place second to none.

The most obvious point of change made by the Reformation was in the church. Her doctrine, worship, and life were all set back on a more firm foundation. Gone were Queen Margaret's medieval attempts to establish the authority of the Popes of Rome over the simpler Celtic Church: the sovereignty of God was reasserted and the rule of His Word given its primacy. Luther's watchwords—*sola Scriptura, sola gratia, solo Christo, sola fide, soli Deo gloria*—became first the gossip and eventually the established religion of the realm. What a difference was made on Sunday morning and evening, when the public worship of God was conducted by the ordained ministry for all! The whole biblical priority of preaching, sacraments, prayer, and praise came into its own. Also, the recognition of God's congregational leadership was given back to the people, and that same leadership's responsibility to keep proper spiritual order in the church fellowship was also seen. Let's look together at each of these items.

REFORMATION IN CHURCH DOCTRINE

The 16th Century Reformation of Christianity in Scotland was very much a doctrinal affair. Yes, there were profound social, economic, and political factors at work, but on some levels, there always are. What was so different and unique this time? Contrary to the distortions of fashionable historicism, it is abundantly clear that the Reformation was a profoundly theological movement.

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1. Cf. Adomnán of Iona, *Life of St. Columba*, trans. Richard Sharpe (London: Penguin, 1995).

Beginning under the impact of Martin Luther from Wittenberg and flowering under the influence of John Calvin from Geneva, this movement touched every aspect of life in the Old Country. But its root was firmly in the soil of Christian teaching.

In Germany, Luther had wrestled early in life through an Augustinian rejection of his more native Ockhamist nominalism, opening him to feel the injustice of the indulgence system on the one hand and the inadequacy of sacramental transubstantiation on the other. But it was his more mature consideration of the doctrine of justification—moving him beyond even Augustine and more towards the Apostle Paul—that so impacted Scotland.

Luther learned from his study of the Bible that justification was *sola fide*, “by faith alone,” and by an “alien” *justitia*, or an “alien or foreign righteousness.”² It is literally the righteousness of someone else—of another person, the incarnate God-man Jesus Christ—that can alone save. How can Christ’s righteousness be yours? “By faith alone,” Luther said, is how you may grasp and take hold of Him as your own. And this faith must be no shallow or mere verbal profession of faith, but it must be a real and deep trust, reliance, resting, or grasping of

Christ by the soul. To have Christ in this way is to have His acceptance by the Father as your own, according to the German Reformer (WA 40/1:229). This was Luther’s key insight which so shook the soul of Scotland.

You can, therefore, be *simul justus et peccator*, “at once righteous and a sinner,” Luther insisted—righteous because of Christ’s righteousness, and a sinner because of your own misdeeds (WA 38:205). Thus, your salvation can only come *solo Christo*, “by Christ alone,” because only in having Jesus as your own can you have hope of heaven. But how can a sinner like you ever receive Christ and His righteousness? Luther pointed back to God: salvation is *sola gratia*, “by grace alone,” because only God can give this gift of Christ and saving faith in Him to a needy sinner like you or me.

The influence of this Lutheran doctrine of justification was profound in Scotland, especially in the second quarter of the 16th Century. Lutheran books poured into Scotland secretly by boat from across the Channel. Luther’s preface to the New Testament was translated in 1525 and added as a prologue to Murdoch Nesbit’s *The New Testament in Scots*.³ In 1533, Scottish exile John Gau issued his book *The Richt Vay to the Kingdom of Heuine*, which was little more than a translation of a Danish version of an earlier German Lutheran work.⁴ Even Wedderburn’s *Gude and Godlie Ballatis* helped spread Lutheran teaching more popularly through song.⁵

In St. Andrews—the greatest of the Scottish Roman sees and home not just of golf but also of the first native Scottish university—Archbishop James Beaton and later his nephew Cardinal David Beaton sought in vain to turn back this tide of doctrinal reform. The father and first martyr of the Reformation in Scotland, the godly Patrick Hamilton, was roasted alive on 29 February 1528 for his strong Lutheran views by the uncle bishop. Perhaps James Beaton commanded this pernicious punishment because of Hamilton’s effective Lutheran teaching under his own nose in the University, Hamilton’s writing of the first Scottish Protestant theological work (the poignant *Patrick’s Places*⁶), or even the potential danger of Patrick Hamilton’s family connection to royal Stuart blood.

Less than twenty years later, the fire burned brightly again; but this time at the direction of the younger Beaton. Consumed was the body of the Zwinglian George Wishart, who had translated the first Helvetic Confession into English and conducted influential preaching tours throughout the Lowlands. At his trial, Wishart denied that auricular confession was a sacrament and asserted the priesthood of all believers. But even this second murderous act of terror—held in public view

2. Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Abteilung Werke*, vol. 2 (Weimar, 1884), 145–146. Hereafter WA.

3. *The New Testament in Scots, being Purvey’s Revision of Wycliffe’s Version turned into Scots by Murchoch Nisbet c. 1520, edited from the unique MS. in the Possession of Lord Amherst of Hackney*, by Thomas Graves Law, 3 vols, The Scottish Text Society [Publications 46, 49 and 52] (Edinburgh: Printed for the Society by W. Blackwood and Sons, [1901–05]).

4. Christiern Pedersen *The Richt Vay to the Kingdom of Heuine*, translated from the Latin by John Gau (Malmö: 1533); repr. *The Richt Vay to the Kingdom of Heuine*, ed. Alexander F. Mitchell, The Scottish Text Society [Publication 12] (Edinburgh: Printed for the Society by W. Blackwood and Sons, [1888]). Pedersen’s work was largely based upon, Urbanus Rhegius, *Die zw lff artikel unsers chrisliche glaubens* [Exposition of the Twelve Articles of the Apostles’ Creed] (Augsburg, 1523). See Mitchell’s Introduction for more background on the origins of this work.

5. James Wedderburn, John Wedderburn, and Robert Wedderburn, *Ane compendeous buke, of Godlye psalmes and spirituall psalmes and spirituall sangis. Newly translated out of Latine into Inglis, gadderit out of mony and divers scripturis, w[i]th mony plesande ballatis, and cheangit. Out of vaine sangis in Godlie sangis for tyll auode syn and harlatrye. And to remember on the gret benefices of God* (Bassandyne, 1565; revised edition, Edinburgh: John Scot for Thomas Bassandyne, 1567); repr. A. F. Mitchell, *A Compendious Book of Godly and Spiritual songs, commonly known as “The Gude and Godlie ballatis,”* The Scottish Text Society [Publication 39] (Edinburgh, London: Printed for the Society by W. Blackwood and Sons, [1897]).

6. Patrick Hamilton, *Dyvers Frutful Gatheriges of Scripture Concermyng Fayth and Workes*, translated from the Latin by J. Frith (1532); commonly known as *Patrick’s Places* from Frith’s preface (which first appears as part of the title in the 1598 edition).

just outside the Castle gate—did not snuff out the gospel light! The dust of the martyrs was again the seed of the church: Wishart died well and God richly blessed His Church. The clock could not be turned back on the Scottish Kirk; Tyndale's *New Testament* was abroad in the land, and John Knox was afoot as well!

Born outside Haddington in East Lothian and educated at St. Andrews, John Knox was ordained by the Bishop of Dunblane in 1536 and later converted to the Protestant faith by reading John 17 under the influence of Thomas Guiliame, Chaplain to the Earl of Arran. While tutor to the sons of Protestant sympathizers, Knox met Wishart, eventually serving as his bodyguard on several preaching tours. This unconventional homiletical training was evidentially quite effective! After the arrest, trial, and martyrdom of Wishart—as well as the resulting execution of the responsible cleric—Knox entered St. Andrews Castle, where he received a call to preach the gospel to the reforming “Castilians,” as the Protestants who settled themselves in St. Andrew's Castle for worship and protection were known. Scotland's most powerful preacher was born! With the fall of the castle in 1547 to the Regent's forces, Knox was imprisoned in a French galley ship for 19 months, somehow managing to write a revision of his comrade Henry Balnave's *Justification by Faith* while in chains.⁷ From even this early period, Knox's unbending commitment to Luther's doctrine of justification was foundational to all his thinking.

REFORMATION IN CHURCH WORSHIP

From this point in his life, profound doctrinal influences only increased in Knox's thought. Upon his release from slavery, Knox was subsequently appointed first to preach in Berwick-on-Tweed and then Newcastle-Upon-Tyne in northern England. During these, his first settled pastoral charges, the Scotsman became deeply concerned that Christian worship be biblical through and through. No other issue so animated his preaching from this time forward.

The state of religion in his Northumbrian charges was hardly Reformed. Cuthbert Tonstall, the Bishop of Durham, under whose diocese Knox fell, was not sympathetic to reformation and most of the area priests were overtly loyal to Roman rites. King Edward VI's government, however, and the Reform-minded Cranmer were eager for Knox to be a catalyst for change in the far north. The Prayer Book of 1549 was not really known in this wild English outpost, so Knox's hand was free locally to construct a more simple order of service,

patterned after a more Scriptural model. Still, his labors did not go unnoticed by his enemies, and they commanded that he appear before the Council of the North in 1550. His trial, however, served as but a platform for the vindication of his views. In December 1551, he was again affirmed by the authorities when appointed Chaplain Ordinary to Edward VI and was later involved in the revision of the *Book of Common Prayer*.

Knox's concern about worship sprang from the same theological root as his doctrine of justification by faith: the Protestant, or Scriptural, principle that the Bible is the only rule of faith and practice. This ideal was his theological compass throughout the stormy seas of his life. In childhood, Knox had been taught that the Church of Rome was the rule of faith and practice. She taught him that in the Mass the elements of bread and wine were literally transformed into the physical body and blood of Jesus. She taught him that the water of baptism regenerated the lost soul. She taught him that the clergy were to dominate liturgical music and read the sacred Book only in a foreign tongue. She taught him to cloak his heart in this medieval confusion and darkness, diverting and separating his life from that of Christ's, thus choking his soul.

But with his conversion, Knox learned otherwise. John 17 awakened his dull heart: “And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent.” Wed to Christ from his inmost soul by the Holy Spirit, John Knox found the life, joy, peace, and love eternal he knew he did not have in himself alone. But that same precious chapter also said something else crucial to his future ministry: “Thy word is truth.” Now that John Knox was a new man, his whole life, his whole soul, and all his days were to be re-oriented around God and His Word. God was glorified, and His incarnate Son was loved best, when His Word was heeded as truth itself. By Knox, we are reminded to look to the Bible alone for our sure word of truth—all religious worship must have clear biblical warrant or it must be counted but an idol. On this basis, Pastor John Knox opposed all extra-biblical practices, sweeping the field clean from the traditional accretions of previous generations: no more cup only for the priests, no more adoration of the elements—in short, no more Mass.

In April 1550, Knox penned *A Vindication of the Doctrine that the Sacrifice of the Mass is Idolatry*, nailing his colors to the mast on this important worship issue (Knox, *Works*, 3:29–70). In the 1552 revision of the *Book of Common Prayer* with which he was involved, Knox

7. See in John Knox, *The Works of John Knox*, ed. David Laing, vol. 3 (Edinburgh, 1854), 403–542.

insisted that the term “mass” be dropped altogether from Christian services. Rightly opposing in principle any kneeling to receive the Supper because it smacked of adoration of the elements, it was Knox’s objections that brought change. A printed caveat was hastily added to the book that such a posture was not indicative of adoration of the elements. As this stipulation was printed in black ink next to the otherwise red type, Knox’s detractors referred to this revision as the “Black Rubric.” Victory was his, however, and the Mass was rejected as a proxy for the whole complex medieval system.

Knox’s new liturgy gave a high place to the reading and preaching of the Word of God in the common language of the people. We know little of the details of his sermons from this period, but it would not be surprising to learn that the Scottish Reformer followed in the footsteps of John Hus and John Calvin in practicing regular, serial expository preaching through books of the Old and New Testaments. No longer a priest separated from the people and representing an oppressive and dominating hierarchy, Knox was a minister of the gospel, a servant of God and his brethren, sharing with them the precious Scriptures, the Word of life.

The congregation was also freed from mere observation to active participation in the worship of God. The singing of Psalms—the book of the Bible which so eloquently captures the moods of the soul, full of depression, excitement, oppression, and joy—became a staple of the people of God in public corporate worship. Even today, the singing of this portion of God’s Word strengthens the hearts of the participants and makes the Old Testament more relevant and alive in their daily Bible reading. This inner religion of the Psalms, gained by hearty singing in common versions, Knox would doubtless tell us, is more needed in American evangelicalism today!

And to the Word read, preached, prayed, and sung, Knox rightly added the two sacraments found in the Scriptures: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. In writing *Answers to Some Questions Concerning Baptism*, Knox got straight to the point with his opening sentence:

The baptism now used in the Papistry is not the true baptism which Jesus Christ did institute and command to be used in his kirk; but it is an adulteration and profanation of the same, and therefore is to be avoided of all God’s children (Knox, *Works*, 4.118).

In the place of this error, Knox established the biblical order of covenant baptism, freed from superstition and focused upon hope in Christ alone for salvation.

The Lord’s Supper also received positive treatment by the Scottish Reformer, for example in his *A Summary, According to the Holy Scriptures, of the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper*, appended to his more polemic April 1550 volume mentioned previously (Knox, *Works*, 3.71–75). Knox’s emphasis fell strongly on the role of faith in rightly receiving the Supper and on the power of the Holy Spirit in our souls’ feeding on Christ who is in heaven:

For it is not his presence in the bread that can save us, but his presence in our hearts, through faith in his blood, which has washed out our sins, and pacified his Father’s wrath towards us.... For in the sacrament we receive Jesus Christ spiritually, as did the fathers of the Old Testament, according to St. Paul’s saying (*Works* 3.75).

No hint of Roman transubstantiation, Lutheran consubstantiation, or Zwinglian memorialism is found in Knox’s high Calvinistic view, even at this early stage in his ministry.

REFORMATION IN CHURCH ORDER

With the rise of Mary Tudor to the English throne, Knox was forced in 1554 to depart his adopted home in England and flee to the Continent. Landing first in Dieppe on the Normandy coast, the Scottish Reformer spent two years visiting major Reformation centers. In Geneva, Berne, Zurich, Basel, Strasbourg, and Frankfurt, Knox consulted with John Calvin, Theodore Beza, Heinrich Bullinger, Martin Bucer, and others, becoming familiar at first hand with the Magisterial Reformers. During this period, Knox evolved from a Scotsman in exile to a true European, traveling extensively and experiencing the myriad cultures and churches on the Continent.

Serving within the episcopal structure in the Church of England had not afforded the Scottish Reformer the freedom to develop ecclesiastical structures after a biblical pattern. However, his 1552 decline of the bishopric in Rochester and public critiques of episcopacy were well known. The full flowering of such doctrinal concerns would have to wait until the late 16th to mid-17th Centuries when, under the watchful eyes of Andrew Melville, Samuel Rutherford, and George Gillespie, the general principles of biblical government could be matured in the crucible of church and national life. It could even be argued that pure Scottish Presbyterianism did not come truly into its own until the mid 19th Century, when the Evangelical Party, in the spirit of John Knox, was forced

to protect the spirituality of the church against the intrusions of patronage in the 1843 Disruption, led by Thomas Chalmers and William Cunningham. Be that as it may, at this very early stage in Knox's ministry, some basic theological axioms propaedeutic to later developments were already in place.

The principle so influential on Knox's views of church doctrine and worship was also applicable to the realm of church government: the Bible's regulative nature applied to both faith and practice. Naturally, therefore, church structure and function ought to be set on the same basis. Thus, the acorn from which later Presbyterianism grew was the same Protestant principle that the Scriptures alone are the only rule of faith and practice. As we have seen, this foundational precept was already well established in Knox's doctrinal and doxological theology, so at least to this extent he was a proto-Presbyterian.

But there is more. Scottish historian James Kirk has uncovered that since the earliest days of Lutheran influence in Scotland, small bands of Protestant believers met secretly for Christian fellowship. These "privy kirks" or "conventicles," as they were called, were so feared that the Scottish Parliament outlawed them in 1541. Men and women from all walks of life were imprisoned or hung for these secret times of Bible reading, theological discussion, prayer, and singing. But the underground "privy kirk" movement could not be stopped. The spiritual encouragement of heart-felt worship met a real need in Scottish lives. These underground little churches became nurseries in which future ministers, elders, and deacons were grown, so that they might one day serve openly and help reform the Scottish Kirk.

Knox supported privy kirks at the peril of his own life. With a bounty on his head, he chanced a return trip to Scotland from 1555–1556 during his Marian exile to encourage the saints. Meeting with these bands of believers in private homes, Knox not only preached the Word of God but also served the Lord's Supper to the privy kirks. Clearly these were important ecclesiastical gatherings to the Reformer's mind.

Pressed to return and pastor the English exiles in Geneva, Knox left *A Letter of Wholesome Counsel, Addressed to His Brethren in Scotland* with them upon his departure. Here he gave clear instructions on private worship:

No, brethren, you are ordained of God to rule your own houses in his true fear, and according to his word. Within your houses, I say, in some cases, you are bishops and kings; your wife, children, servants, and family

are your bishopric and charge. Of you it shall be required how carefully and diligently you have always instructed them in God's true knowledge, how you have studied to plant virtue in them and repress vice. And therefore I say, you must make them partakers in reading, exhorting, and in making common prayers, which I would in every house were used once a day at least (Knox, *Works* 4.137).

In contrast to the medieval emphasis upon monks, nuns, and monastic orders as the nurseries of the soul, in Reformation fashion Knox pointed to the Christian family as the proper forum for this development.

But Knox's concern did not end with family worship. He went on to urge privy kirks upon the consciences of these believers, as well:

Considering that St. Paul calls the congregation "the body of Christ," whereof every one of us is a member, teaching us thereby that no member is of sufficiency to sustain and feed itself without the help and support of another: I think it necessary for the conference of scriptures, assemblies of brethren be had (Knox, *Works* 4.137).

The Reformer went on to instruct that these privy kirks be held weekly and include an invocation, confession of sins, the reading of Scripture, a sermon or discussion of the text, and common prayers.

Conciliar government with graded church courts would have to wait for a future day, but John Knox clearly was committed to the only structure in which Reformed elders and Sessions could be grown—the Scottish privy kirk. By 1559, privy kirk ministers, elders, and deacons were being elected, practicing their respective roles for the immediate spiritual good of their people and the eventual wider responsibilities of open church life.

Knox was apparently personally committed to the biblical function of church officers as well. Offered a living at All Hallows, London in 1553, Knox refused the appointment because there ministers were not free to practice biblical church discipline. Why be so concerned about such a matter? Knox saw from Scripture (e.g., Matthew 18:15–20 and I Corinthians 5) that discipline was a responsibility from the King of kings for ministers in the Kirk and a mark of the true church. Away was to go the medieval penitential system with its confessionals, vain prayers of merit, and fruitless good works, and in was to come the tough love of proper church discipline, regulated by biblical standards.

CONCLUSIONS

Aside from his wide ranging travels, the time of Knox's Marian exile was most strategically invested in the English-speaking church in Geneva from 1556 to 1559. There he came under the profound influence of Master John Calvin and what Knox considered "the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the Apostles."

Luther may have been the Apostle of the Reformation, but Calvin was the Theologian. Under the Genevan oversight, a Protestant paradigm and ministry model was held up for the world to see and follow. John Knox was drawn to this gospel light, and through him Calvin helped give shape to the Reformation doctrine of the Scottish Kirk and people. On top of the Hamilton's Lutheran foundation and Wishart's Zwinglian skirt were built Knox's Calvinistic edifice that would stand for centuries.

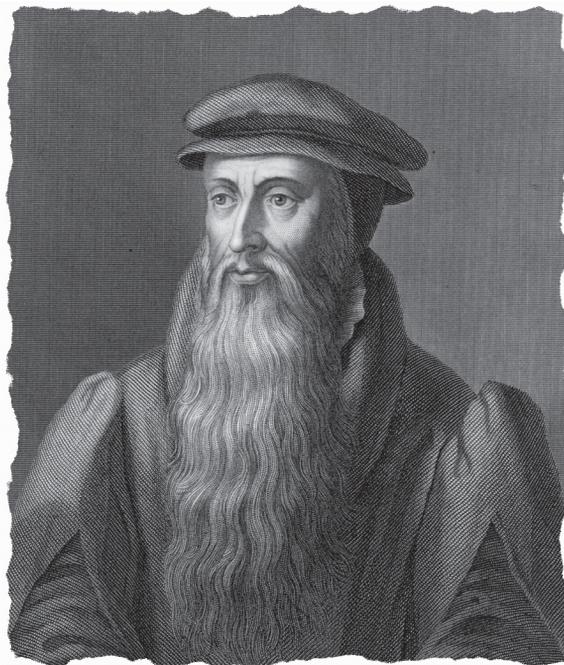
Calvin was of a different temperament than Knox: the Genevan Reformer was shy and scholarly, while the Scottish Reformer was bold and battle-hardened. But the tough Caledonian exile was vexed by complex questions of church and state—the legitimate right and power of these two realms—so he sought the wisdom of the master. Knox was not told all that he wanted to hear: Calvin was not ready to go as far as Knox in asserting the right of the nobles and people to overthrow an unrepentant

monarch and to establish their own Reformed church. Years in the galley and on the run had burned into Knox's psyche and soul the crucial importance of civil power in defending truth and suppressing error.

By penning *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* in 1558, Knox appeared to more timid Continental eyes a revolutionary (Knox, *Works*, 4.349-422). This was all the more so because his cannon ball aimed at Mary Tudor ended up striking the new Queen Elizabeth (who was open to Reformation), and despised him because of it!

The many lessons we have surveyed from the early Scottish Reformation have clear relevance to the 21st Century world in which we live and minister. Biblical doctrine, especially on central matters such as justification by faith and union with Christ, are part of a precious inheritance we must retain in our lives. Biblical worship, with its foundation in the Scriptural principle that the Bible is the only rule of faith and practice, by which man-made idols are to be discerned from God-given prerogatives, should capture regenerate minds and hearts. Biblical church order, again based on the Scriptural principle and the recognition that only Jesus is the King and Head of His Church, is well worth protecting and preserving for the generations to come.

May the Father of our great Lord and Savior Jesus Christ help us all to rediscover these Reformation priorities in our lives and land! ■



John Knox (Photos.com)