

John Knox and the Reformation

by the Rev. Dr. James Begg

Edited by Iain Wright
With an Assessment of the Life of Dr. James Begg

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE LIFE OF
REV. DR. JAMES BEGG

In the sermon that follows the reader may find the emphases James Begg placed on Knox's life and ministry different to the ones he might be expecting. The occasion for the sermon was the tercentenary of the death of the great Scottish Reformer. The address, however, is no mere rehearsing of historical events only vaguely remembered. Begg was addressing his contemporaries and made reference to a number of significant events which would have been very much in their thinking. A little over two years before Begg gave his address the First Vatican Council had adjourned, having defined papal infallibility. One year earlier the Church of Ireland had been disestablished. The same year, the government in London had passed the Education (Scotland) Act which transferred the control of the schools from the church to the state.

In their own way, these were each momentous events for Begg. George III had resisted Catholic emancipation for years. His successor had no such qualms, signing the bill in 1829 when Begg was twenty-one years old. Throughout his life Begg was an ardent opponent of Roman Catholicism, founding the Scottish Reformation Society and its publication *The Bulwark* to counteract what he saw an ever present threat to both church and state.

His concern to maintain the establishment principle may seem strange to a North American reader, but for Begg the principle was the very cornerstone on which church and state together would prosper. It was, moreover, the issue at the heart of the conflict in the Free Church of Scotland over proposed union with the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland. On the occasion of the tercentenary, that which historians describe as the "second ten years' conflict" (1863–73) had not yet

concluded. In that struggle, Begg represented the historically reformed theology that traced its origins back to Knox himself. Begg was resolutely committed to the theology taught by him, and later given even greater definition in the work of the Westminster Assembly.

As Begg comments on the legacy of Knox, it becomes obvious that for him one of the most significant aspects of the reformation in Scotland was the commitment to universal education. The reason hardly needed to be explained. Place a minister in each parish to preach and set alongside him a school teacher. If the ordinary people can read and have the Bible in their own hands and are taught to study it, not only will they not return to Rome, but they will embrace the gospel. Resistance to the threat of Rome and teaching the population to read were not distinct endeavours but parallel courses to the same objective. From this it follows that Begg was not concerned merely with a secular education. The idea that the state could provide an education devoid of sound Biblical teaching was anathema to him. The state was under sacred duty to provide, maintain, and defend Biblical truth. Yielding to the Voluntarism of the United Presbyterian Church was no less abhorrent to him than yielding to the Erastianism of the Church of Scotland prior to the Disruption of 1843. Though his indefatigable opposition to union prevented the two denominations from coming together in his lifetime, ultimately he only succeeded in delaying the merger, not averting it. Begg wrote close to seventy works, mostly

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brief pamphlets on a wide range of subjects often related to the well-being of the ordinary working man. He was leader of those who were committed to a confessional stance in a Free Church increasingly enamoured of German liberalism. His oratorical, debating and organizational skills were not inconsiderable; and yet, for all his gifts, he was unable to hold the Free Church to its founding principles. At best he delayed the inevitable, but in truth even that is questionable.

In Begg's lifetime his name would have been "as familiar as any contemporary politician."¹ When the press came to comment on the workings of the courts of the church, he was vilified as the arch-bigot who wanted to take "his bigotry neat."² "For twenty years after this the name of Dr. Begg was used in the Edinburgh newspapers as a synonym for bigotry and intolerance."³ His opposition not only to union with United Presbyterians but his resolute insistence on exclusive and unaccompanied Psalm singing, and his dogged sounding of the warning against Romanism, made sure of his being maintained before the public gaze as a Calvinistic fossil out of touch as well as out of sympathy with modern trends. "It would be hard to find a better example of that misunderstood type of Free Church minister whom posterity has disliked and whose merits have been forgotten."⁴

It was not always so, however. In 1865, while on his

way to Geneva for a time of recuperation following an illness, Begg was involved in a train accident which came close to being fatal. Had Begg been killed instead of seriously injured, posterity would have remembered him as a great champion of the working classes, rather than a dour cleric unable to deal with the changing scene of Scottish Church life.⁵

Begg had a strong personality and was "utterly indifferent to abuse and misrepresentation, so long as [he was] persuaded that [he was] in the path of duty."⁶ "Truth and right," as he said, "have been in the minority since the time of Noah."⁷ For his part, he "would rather be a minister in the smallest Church in Christendom, holding a full testimony for Christ, than [he] would be a minister of the largest union that ever was formed or conceived, if there is anything like a sacrifice of principle involved."⁸

Within the Free Church his opponents thought little of him, and seemed incapable of separating their personal feelings from an honest assessment of their chief antagonist. William Robertson Smith despised Begg as a ranter.⁹ Smith's biographer wrote: "Dr. Begg, whose intervention in any controversy was ominous of misfortunes for the Church, appeared as the stormy petrel of a new tempest."¹⁰ In the opinion of Carnegie Simpson, although Begg was one of the two most powerful leaders of the Free Church, his influence was "a disastrous one." "If Begg had been a nobler man, he would have been something of a great man."¹¹ Rainy, in a letter to the author of his biography, wrote: "Begg was the evil genius of the Free Church. He introduced a policy of conspiracy and of attempting to carry points by threatening us with law. No man did more to lower the tone of the Church and to secularise it" (*Life of Principal Rainy*, 2.50). Charteris' biographer said, "Begg wrote several books and pamphlets, none of them of enduring merit";¹² which missed the point that Begg wrote topically concerning the issue of the day. Charteris, himself a personal friend of Begg, had commented: "Of all who were prominent [during the Disruption], there is but one survivor; and it is notable that he (Dr. Begg), with manly consistency, held his own then, as ever since, denouncing the Act of Queen Anne as the source of all the evils of the Church."¹³

Not all were scathing in their comments. "The stature of James Begg was universally recognized, albeit sometimes grudgingly, by his contemporaries, but history has not always done him justice."¹⁴ As Arthur Gordon described Begg: "... in addition to his sturdy independence, oratorical gifts, and Scottish mother-wit, Dr. Begg was straight and consistent. Men knew where to find him."¹⁵ For Benjamin Disraeli, Begg was a "lion of

1. T. C. Smout, *A Century of the Scottish People 1830-1950* (London: Fontana 1997) 181.

2. *Edinburgh Evening Courant*, April 28, 1864.

3. Thomas Smith, *Memoirs of James Begg* (Edinburgh: James Gemmell, 1888) 2.373.

4. Andrew Drummond and James Bulloch, *The Scottish Church 1688-1843* (Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press, 1973) 186.

5. Stewart Mechie, *The Church and Scottish Social Development 1780-1870* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960) 119. Andrew Drummond and James Bulloch, *The Church in Victorian Scotland 1843-74* (Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press, 1975) 134.

6. *Daily Review* (Edinburgh), March 22, 1872.

7. Smith, *Memoirs of James Begg*, 2.479.

8. *Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland*, 1863, 233. Hereafter PGAFCS.

9. Andrew Drummond and James Bulloch, *The Church in Late Victorian Scotland 1874-1900* (Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press, 1978) 63.

10. John Black and George Chrystal, *The Life of William Robertson Smith* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1912) 190.

11. Patrick Simpson, *The Life of Principal Rainy* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909) 2.50.

12. J. G. Fyfe, ed., *Scottish Diaries and Memories 1746-1843* (Stirling: Eneas Mackay, 1942) 532.

13. *St. Giles Lectures: First Series. The Scottish Church from the Earliest Times to 1881* (Edinburgh: W & R Chambers, 1881) 319.

14. Kenneth Ross, *Church and Creed in Scotland: The Free Church Case 1900-104 and its Origins* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1988) 19.

15. Arthur Gordon, *The Life of Archibald Hamilton Charteris* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1912) 298.

the tribe of Judah” (299). For Nicoll, “He was generally in conflict with the tendencies of the times ... yet he remains for us ... one of the most striking and memorable figures we have ever gazed on.”¹⁶ Of Begg, William Knight wrote:

I must mention a man from many of whose opinions I differed, and who never won me even as a foeman: a man nevertheless of great power and influence, Dr. James Begg. He was a robust and stalwart antagonist of all that he disapproved of, the most redoubtable and conscientious champion of forlorn causes, a heroic defender of belated opinion. He was never afraid of being in a minority. Lord Beaconsfield [better known as Benjamin Disraeli] once said “The man who fears being in a minority will never be in a majority.” That sentence expresses the ruling principle of Dr. Begg’s life. He knew that he was in a hopeless minority, but a knowledge of the fact only nerved him to work on behalf of the forlorn cause. He had a marvelous power of objecting to the decisions and opinions of his fellowmen.¹⁷

Again Nicoll spoke greatly in admiration of Begg:

After all these years, and some experience of other arenas, he rises before me as by far the most commanding figure in the Church. There is almost no assembly, political, social or ecclesiastical in which I can think of his match, and in the Free Assembly it always seemed a case of eclipse first and the rest nowhere far as sheer popular power was concerned.... He had such qualifications for the leadership of the people that he might easily have been the first man in Scotland; in Parliament the Balfours and the Churchills could not have held a candle to him.¹⁸

The question still remains as to why such an influential figure has become so largely forgotten in his native land. The answer lies partly in the public *persona* created for him by the press. He was the representative of an old-style Calvinism which was out of step with the trends of the day. The people of Scotland did not want to be drawn back, either to the style of worship, or to the ethos of which exclusive psalmody was the embodiment. He “was the last prominent spokesman in the Lowlands for the ideals of the Disruption fathers which their sons were now discarding.”¹⁹

As both a preacher and pastor he enjoyed “one of the very highest reputations ... for personal, private, parochial attention to those who [sat] under him.”²⁰ It must be recognized that few men have suffered more at the

hands of a biographer.²¹ Again, as Macdonald cites in his thesis,²² Nicoll made a sharp comment:

A fatality has attended the biographies of the heroes of the Disruption. With two or three exceptions they are deplorable, presenting the images of fussy, bigoted ecclesiastics, always making speeches or taking bitter part in petty quarrels, and completely dissociated from the larger world of culture. In comparison with Dr. Begg’s life, however, the worst of them is a classic.... The book is, in short, a heap of hay and stubble, with one or two needles hopelessly lost therein.²³

Begg features prominently in two major works on the history of this period: Rainy’s biography and his own. The former always shows Rainy in a good light and Begg in the worst. “Between them these two works have obscured the undoubted fact that Begg was amongst the front rank of Scottish churchmen in the nineteenth century.”²⁴ Begg had, in fact, at one point nominated his future biographer, Thomas Smith, for the Chair of Apologetics at New College instead of William Garden Blaikie. It may have been just as well that this was yet another vote that he lost.²⁵

More recently others, in particular Bishop²⁶ and Macdonald, have sought to look at the life of Begg. In the former there is little more than a recitation of the social issues in which he was involved with no explanation

16. W. Robertson Nicholl, *Princes of the Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1921) 13.

17. William Knight, *Some Nineteenth Century Scotsmen* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, 1909) 106.

18. *British Weekly* (London), 1893, May 11. Ross in commenting on Nicoll’s article said the weight of his judgement was increased by his having been generally opposed to the tendency in the Free Church which Begg represented and its impressiveness was magnified by the fact that he could only have seen Begg when the latter was past his prime. Ross, *Church and Creed*, 20.

19. Drummond and Bulloch, *Church in Late Victorian Scotland*, 53.

20. *Sketches of the Edinburgh Clergy* (Edinburgh: n.p., 1865) 11.

21. Drummond and Bulloch, *Church in Victorian Scotland*, 135.

22. For a detailed treatment of Begg’s contribution regarding the proposed union of the Free Church and the United Presbyterian Church see Neil Angus Macdonald, “The Rev. James Begg, D.D., Free Church ‘Constitutionalist’: A Study of his views on the Testimony, Doctrine, Worship and Practice of the Free Church of Scotland with Special Reference to the Period 1860–8” (D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1984).

23. Nicoll, *Princes of the Church*, 12.

24. Ross, *Church and Creed*, 20.

25. PGAFCS 1868, 221.

26. Donald Harold Bishop, “Church and Society: a study of the social work and thought of James Begg 1808–1883, A. H. Charteris 1835–1908, and David Watson 1859–1943” (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1953).

as to the motivation that lay behind them, and no explanation as to whether his involvement was good, bad or indifferent. Macdonald's thesis is a much better examination, especially of Begg's close involvement in matters concerning the proposed union. Unintentionally but inevitably, however, Macdonald does Begg a disservice. By focusing on the narrow range of issues, he serves to confirm, in the academic mind at least, that the only area of Begg's life worthy of note is his involvement in controversy, especially in the Second Ten Years' Conflict. Though the subject is clearly worthy of consideration, it is a great pity for posterity's appreciation of Begg that he should be seen through such narrow parameters. Rather more disappointingly, Macdonald is willing to dismiss Begg's commitment to the establishment principle as being founded on a weak application of the concept of Israel as a theocracy, and he does not appear to recognize just how profound an effect this doctrine had on Begg's world and life view.

James Begg was committed, whatever the cost, to the maintenance of the Reformed Faith as he understood it. The faith which he maintained was the Calvinist Creed as embodied in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and the *Shorter and Larger Catechisms*. As William Ferguson put it, he was the "orthodox of orthodox."²⁷ He was convinced that the ordinary people of Scotland held these truths as dearly as he did, and he was surprised when events proved him wrong. His was a theology, which had long ceased to be the governing principle of Scottish life. At the time of the Disruption, it must have appeared that the wave of sympathy which buoyed up those who had separated themselves from the established church would herald another Reformation and the rekindling of the fervor of a previous generation. The reality was indeed a great disappointment to Begg, as with the passing of the years all that he held dear was first challenged, then set aside.

27. Ferguson cites a passage from John MacLeod's *Scottish Theology* in which Thomas Carlyle is reported to have exclaimed to Begg during the trial of William Robertson Smith, "Have my countrymen's heads become turnips when they think that they can hold the premises of German unbelief and draw the conclusions of Scottish Evangelical Theology?" Stewart J. Brown and George Newlands, eds., *Scottish Christianity in the Modern World* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000) 84. John MacLeod, *Scottish Theology* (1943; repr., Edinburgh: Knox Press, 1974) 310.

28. *Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. Begg, James.

29. Alexander Cheyne, *Transforming the Kirk* (Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press, 1983) 123.

30. *North British Mail* (Glasgow), 1874. March 10.

31. Donald Smith, *Passive Obedience and Prophetic Protest: Social Criticism in the Scottish Church 1830-1945* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987) 314.

He "seemed to know instinctively how to arrest his audience and carry them along with him. Yet it was observed that Begg had little control over the deeper feelings of men."²⁸ He failed in the end, despite his tremendous energy and considerable journalistic and pamphleteering skills,²⁹ to persuade sufficient numbers of his brethren in the Free Church to maintain the principles of the Disruption. How can the historian account for this?

On every theological subject of any consequence that the Free Church faced, and some that really were of no consequence, Begg could be relied on to give the traditional response. He spoke with frequent quotations from Scripture, often with humor and not a little style. Yet it was clear that there was no room for accommodation with those whose views need not necessarily be at the opposite end of the spectrum. His strict conservatism lost him the sympathy of not only those who were rapidly overturning the historic position of the Free Church, but many who held the middle ground.

His sheer activism told against him. Reading through the minutes of the Free Presbytery of Edinburgh or the Free Synod of Lothian and Tweeddale and the reports of the *Proceedings of the General Assembly* show how frequently he was on his feet. It was not uncommon for Begg to make as many as sixteen speeches in one Assembly. If every commissioner had spoken as much as he did, then one Assembly would have run into the next. There was certainly an exasperation in the mind of some that Begg appeared like a stormy petrel, the harbinger of disaster for the church. He was to them simply "that bustling, meddling clergyman."³⁰

He seems to have been totally indiscriminate as to which issues he raised. He had but to hear that all was not well at the Musselburgh Races for him to be on his feet at the Free Presbytery of Edinburgh, calling for a committee to look into its "drunkenness and profligacy." In the way in which such things function, to propose action on a subject meant the forming of a committee and that one would be appointed as the convenor. At times, Begg could boast that he was on the majority of the General Assembly's Committees.

In terms of his social concerns, Begg invariably took the side of the working man against the interests of the establishment. As one of the "most outspoken critics of the aristocracy,"³¹ his political radicalism provoked the anger of at least some of the landowners and would have made him suspect in the eyes of conservative churchmen. Again the sheer breadth of the topics which he covered gives the impression that there could hardly have been an issue upon which Begg would have been

unwilling to speak: Prussia's war with France; the collapse of a bank in Glasgow; the arrest of a woman in Florence for distributing tracts; the opening of Princes' Street Gardens; the closing of the Botanical Gardens; Royal Mail deliveries; city planning and new streets; Saturday opening of shops; the Syrian Massacre; drunkenness at the Musselburgh races; the national education system; disestablishment of the Church of Ireland; the number of rooms in a house per family; highland evictions and emigration; franchise for parliament; eligibility of Members of Parliament. The aforementioned is not even an exhaustive list! There are indications not only from the secular press but even from Hugh Miller, editor of *The Witness*, that at times the editors of newspapers and broadsheets were irritated by yet another missive on this subject or that.

Begg was out of sympathy with the spirit of the age. The Truth of Scripture, as he saw it was there to be proclaimed, not debated. He was not temperamentally equipped to negotiate, whether concerning the establishment principle, exclusive psalmody, musical instruments in worship or anything else. He held to the principles that, as far as he was concerned, had guided the Kirk since the days of John Knox. There is no indication of bitterness or of pride in the writings or speeches of Begg, but there is evidently great sorrow, disappointment and perhaps even some perplexity that so often his, if not the only voice, was one that went unheeded. As colleagues of his generation passed away, he saw them being replaced by men who did not love the old ways. Typically and poignantly, he quoted from Scripture of the days when the children of Israel were being brought under the yoke of slavery: *Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph* (Exod. 1:8). As far as he was concerned, the younger generation of men was turning its back on those who had been the intimates of God. He had striven to maintain Biblical orthodoxy, but knew that he was losing the battle. In his sixties Begg addressed the Assembly: "Come what will, I trust to die an honest and a consistent man."³² He was hated, despised and vilified in his own generation: the object of scorn in the press, and castigated in the biographies of his contemporaries; but none can doubt that he was both "honest and consistent."

Begg has suffered much at the hands of his friends as well as those of his critics. His biographer, Thomas Smith, seemed to have had a poor understanding of his subject. He thought that Begg had little knowledge or liking for poetry, and yet the pamphlets and speeches recorded often have a line of verse to illustrate a point; and he seems to have little understanding of what really

motivated Begg, either in the courts of the church or in the sphere of social responsibility. He alluded to the various projects in which Begg was involved, but with little sympathy. With no robust and balanced view of the life of Begg, it was inevitable that his high profile over the union controversy would be the abiding image. This is a most unfair portrayal of such a leading figure. It is sad that the image of the litigious, not to mention belligerent Begg, is one which those who see themselves as his direct spiritual descendants are seeking to perpetuate. They have seized upon his bold and uncompromising stand as the leader of the minority opposed to compromise on a matter of principle, but they have failed to grasp fully the principles themselves, while at the same time neglecting his substantial commitment to social issues. By doing so they will assure that a further generation will see Begg as being overly quick to pursue litigation to achieve his own ends, while it will fail to acknowledge him as a very much larger man than that. Though the antipathy of his opponents was obvious even in his own day, succeeding generations have had removed from their gaze that which would have helped correct their appreciation. It was ordinary working men who seemed to have the better understanding of Begg, for "[w]hen he was carried to his grave in Edinburgh, great multitudes of working men gathered, and watched with a solemn fixed attention. The nation knew that one of her greatest confessors of Christ had fallen silent."³³

There remains at least one more question to ask of the life and work of James Begg: to what extent is or should he be a model for those who follow? He tried and ultimately failed to keep the Free Church true to its founding principles. With the benefit of hindsight, what counsel might have been given him to assist him in what he sought to do, and to that extent what lessons might be learned when dealing with the issues of the present generation? Though it is evident that Begg enjoyed controversy, it was not that he was a hard-hearted man concerned only with principle. Even in controversy there was a warm side to him, which enables the reader to understand why it could be said by an opponent that he failed to win him even as a foe. When that is coupled with his boundless energy for improving the lot of the ordinary working man, it is obvious that he was far from being a harsh and uncaring man. Yet for all that, he made no accommodation to the opinions that were not his own. No doubt accommodation would have been seen as compromise, but where Begg did his own cause harm was by giving the impression

32. PGAFCS 1870, 239.

33. *British Weekly* (London), 1893. May 11.

that he could not so much as see the other point of view. It must be possible, without compromising one's own dearly-held beliefs, at least to acknowledge that a fellow believer may have come to a different opinion, while still seeking to remain true to Scripture.

On a more practical level, though the energy expended so greatly on so many matters leaves the examiner of Begg's life amazed at all he sought to do, it must have been extremely wearing on his colleagues. Not everyone, perhaps not anyone, had his zeal and enthusiasm for so many diverse issues or to the same intensity. Ultimately, it creates the impression that a voice that is raised on every issue is heard on none. For those who would expend their energy for the kingdom of God, the need is not to be any less energetic, but perhaps to show greater discernment as to the issues that can by no means be allowed to pass by, while recognizing that there are indeed some which, though not trivial, do not require the clarion call to arms.

Where Begg stands head and shoulders above the vast majority of his peers is in his promotion of the well-being of the ordinary working man. He was not without a degree of Victorian paternalism, yet that surely is forgivable. It is not that churchmen cannot be found in the present generation who will speak out concerning social issues, but few of them would have had any sympathy for Begg's theology, and those who would be closest to his theology seem the least willing to address those concerns. There has been a retreat into pietism in the last hundred years by those who hold a high view of Scripture. It appears that the sphere of social concern has been largely conceded to those without sympathy for the Reformed cause. Begg is an encouragement to engage in social issues and direct involvement in ameliorating them, not as a compromise of the gospel message, but as a necessary consequence of commitment to it. It is particularly disappointing that the clear testimony of Begg to the harmony between a strong gospel message and clear social conscience is obscured by those who seek to make use of his reputation for their own much narrower concerns.

It has to be admitted that Begg was largely out of

34. John Knox died in his home in Edinburgh on November 24, 1572.

35. The church to which Begg was referring was the High Kirk of St. Giles, which stands on the south side of the Royal Mile in Edinburgh, a short walk from John Knox's House which is also located on the Royal Mile a few hundred yards further east.

36. James Begg, *God's Gift to Scotland in John Knox and the Reformation. A Sermon Preached ... November 24 ... the Tercentenary of Knox's Death* (Perth: Dewar, Mitchell & Co., printers, 1872). "Reprinted from the Perthshire courier."

sympathy with his age. He looked back to a previous generation with a rather wistful, perhaps rather naive, desire. The truth is that all who desire to live a godly life will face persecution, as Paul wrote. The Christian is living in this world, but his citizenship is in heaven. To that extent it is his lot always to be out of sympathy with the spirit of the age. Begg certainly had his "feet of clay," as do all men. Nevertheless, he stands out as one who would not be swept along by every breeze that blew upon him. Not every Christian may share his theology and his heavy dependence upon the establishment principle, and yet in his willingness to stand firm by what he understood Scripture to be teaching, as well as practically to apply those principles to a wide variety of issues and situations, he must surely be a great encouragement. The reward of those who enter into glory is to hear the Master say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant!" Honesty and consistency were hallmarks of Begg's ministry. His stated desire was to die an honest and consistent man. As far as he was, by grace, able to accomplish that great aim, according to his light, he remains an encouragement for those who follow after.

JOHN KNOX AND THE REFORMATION

BY THE REV. DR. JAMES BEGG

On Sabbath evening November 24,³⁴ being the Tercentenary of the death of John Knox, the Rev. Dr Begg preached in John Knox's Church,³⁵ Edinburgh, a sermon on "God's gift to Scotland in John Knox and the Reformation."³⁶ The church was crowded to excess, and hundreds could not obtain admission. After the usual devotional exercises. [sic]

The Rev. Dr. Begg chose for his text Psalm 44:1, "We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us what work Thou didst in their days in the times of old." There are several principles of much importance and of perpetual application indicated in this portion of the Divine Word. The following may be specified amongst others: A Christian must have regard to the past in his devout contemplations as well as to the present and the future. All the blessings of the past must be traced directly, moreover, to the hand of God. Men and other means are employed as instruments, but God himself is the great worker, and to Him belongs all the glory. All the blessings of the past, as well as of the present, ought to give rise, therefore, to songs of thankfulness. This verse is part of the praise which God has provided for the Church by the inspiration of His Holy Spirit, and which we know he will graciously accept, and as the tide of blessings flows on the tide of praise should

swell and increase. Parents, moreover, are bound to inform their children, and truly Christian parents do inform their children, in regard to God's past goodness in providence and grace, so that "race unto race may praise His works and show forth His mighty deeds."³⁷ These and other principles and lessons are clearly embodied in the text, and in other circumstances might be fully illustrated. But we have met specially to consider one fitting application of the text, viz., the event which took place a few yards from where we speak 300 years ago, and the signal gift of God to Scotland in John Knox and the Reformation. We shall, first, accordingly consider the man whom God chiefly honoured and raised up; and, secondly, the work of the Reformation, in connection with which he was so powerful an instrument.

(1) The man, or in other words the gift of God in John Knox. When Elijah was carried to heaven in a chariot of fire, Elisha exclaimed, "My Father, my Father, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof." In this he spoke truth, but partial truth. He was too desponding. He placed too much dependence on man, and he was made after wards to feel that his strength lay entirely in "the Lord God of Elijah," who never changes [cf 2 Kings 2:12, 14]. No creature is a ground of trust or is perfect, and we do not claim perfection for Knox. No creature is necessary, and it has justly been said, that "the best of men are but men at the best."³⁸ But when a great work is to be done God generally raises up powerful instruments to accomplish that work, and this was never more wonderfully illustrated than in the case of our great Reformer. "What went ye out for to see? A reed shaken with the wind?" [cf. Matt. 11:7; Luke 7:24]. If ye did ye must certainly have been disappointed. On the contrary, ye saw a man of the greatest firmness, with singular comprehension of mind, and the most remarkable mental power—a rare combination of strong faith, clear perception, undaunted courage, the most tender sensibility, and the most earnest patriotism. Christian principle of the most decided kind was the undoubted substratum of his whole character. You now see him from the ends of the earth towering head and shoulders above all his countrymen. Scotland has had many, eminent and good men, but it is no disparagement to any of them to say that she has only had one John Knox. And as the loftiest mountains seem most remarkable at a distance, so this great man, raised up by God, is seen today across three centuries towering head and shoulders above the most eminent of Scotchmen. There was a rare combination of gifts and graces in our illustrious Reformer. Physical and moral courage are not always, are indeed rarely, combined. Some men can stand at the

cannon's mouth who shrink from confronting their fellowmen in debate; and others can face the most stormy assembly who would shrink from the horrors of war. But in Knox both elements were combined, and in the highest degree.

We see him first carrying the sword before Wishart.³⁹ Amidst the hardships and prostration of the French galleys, and in the face of scowling foes he was brave and determined, and inspired with courage his desponding fellow-sufferers. He preached with determination in the face of armed men threatening his life. He was not afraid even when "no man stood by him" to speak unwelcome truth to the Potentates of the earth. He gives us a most elevated conception of an ambassador of heaven. Amongst his last acts on earth was to denounce vengeance on the King of France for the massacre of St. Bartholomew.⁴⁰ 'Worn out' says M'Crie, and near to death, the Reformer heard of the massacre of St. Bartholomew, and "being conveyed to the pulpit . . . he thundered the vengeance of heaven against 'that cruel murderer and false traitor, the King of France,' and desired Le Croc, the French ambassador, to tell his Master that sentence was pronounced against him in Scotland, that the Divine vengeance would never depart from him nor from his house if repentance did not ensue, but his name would remain an execration to posterity, and none proceeding from his loins should enjoy his kingdom in peace."⁴¹

The rare combination of the theologian and the statesmen in Knox was equally remarkable with this. It laid the foundation of that elevated system of Christian ethics and social science which, when carried out, even partially, made Scotland illustrious. The combination of cheery humour and the utmost firmness, of immense power and thorough disinterestedness, stern determination in public life, with a most remarkable tenderness of domestic affection, and also a deep feeling of sympathy with the helpless and oppressed, constituted some more of the rare peculiarities of Knox. In a word, he was a many-sided and most remarkable

37. Begg is slightly misquoting the Scottish Metrical version of Psalm 145:4.

38. From a letter from John Aubrey to Anthony Wood dated June 15, 1680 quoting a Parliamentary General, John Lambert (1619–83). The full quote is, "I remember one sayinge of generall Lambert's that, 'the best of men are but men at the best.'" John Aubrey, *Brief Lives: Chiefly of Contemporaries, Set Down by John Aubrey*, ed. Andrew Clark (Oxford: Clarendon, 1898).

39. George Wishart (1513–1546), through his preaching, popularized the theology of John Calvin in Scotland. He was burnt at the stake on March 1, 1546 at St. Andrews, Scotland.

40. August 23, 1572.

41. Thomas M'Crie, *Life of John Knox* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1840) p. 337.

man, and eminently qualified by God both by gifts and grace for the signal service to which he was called, and which has now stood the test of three centuries of trial.

That personal Christianity was the true basis of his character need not be repeated. Knox was a man of earnest piety. Such objects as he aimed at, and such unfaltering determination as he manifested could only spring from such a source. There were two features of his character, however, apart from all others, which were certainly pre-eminent, and which were specially required for his work, viz., unwavering firmness, determination, and constancy, and an entire submission of his mind and will to the authority of God in His word. Experience of mankind demonstrates that there is nothing so rare as consistent firmness amidst difficulty. Talent is much more common than tenacity, and yet it is tenacity that, by the Divine blessing, carries the day. It is especially necessary in public enterprises, and in those raised up by God to work deliverances in the earth. There is a contagious power in determination. Feebleness and vacillation are incompatible with success. When “a standard bearer fainteth” the troops are dispersed, and “if the trumpet gives an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself for the battle?” Hence the old proclamation in the camp of Israel, “Whoso is faint hearted, let him go and return to his house, lest his neighbour’s heart faint as well as his.” Knox, although tried as few men have been, died with this remarkable proclamation over his grave—“Here lies the man that never feared the face of man.”⁴² M’Crie tells us that although he did not expect that the garrison of St. Andrews would be able to hold out, Knox could not prevail upon himself to desert his charge, and resolved to share with his brethren the hazards of the siege, whilst his colleague, John Rough, retired to England. He was thus made prisoner and cruelly treated. Confined to the French galleys, and asked insultingly to give the kiss of adoration to a painted image of the Virgin his historian says he refused, 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 our lady now save herself, she is light enough, let her learn to swim” (M’Crie, *Life of John Knox*, 42). The image was saved with difficulty. In sight of St. Andrews from the same galleys, the emaciated and sickly Knox, being asked if he knew the city, said, “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 how weak soever I now appear, that I shall not depart this life till my tongue shall glorify His godly name in the same place” (M’Crie, 43).

In his remarkable essay on “Decision of Character,” John Foster, without referring to Knox, speaks of this determined energy as contrasting remarkably with our ordinary experience of mankind, and even of great men.

“A little acquaintance,” says he, “with mankind, will supply numberless illustrations of the importance of this qualification. You will often see a person anxiously hesitating a long time between different or opposite determinations, though impatient of the pain of such a state, and ashamed of the debility. A faint impulse of preference alternates toward the one and toward the other; and the mind, while thus held in a trembling balance, is vexed that it cannot get some new thought, or feeling or motive; that it has not more sense, more resolution, more of anything that would save it from envying even the decisive instinct of brutes. It wishes that any circumstance might happen, or any person might appear that could deliver it from the miserable suspense. In many instances, when a determination is adopted, it is frustrated by this temperament....”⁴³

“Sometimes, indeed, it happens that a person so constituted falls into the train, and under the permanent ascendancy of some stronger mind, which thus becomes through life the oracle and guide, and gives the inferior a steady will and plan ...” (Foster, 87).

“When a firm decisive spirit is recognized, it is curious to see how the space clears around a man, and leaves him room and freedom. But this position to interrogate, dictate, or banter, preserves a respectful and politic distance, judging it not unwise it keeps the peace with a person of so much energy ...” (90).

“The subject of such a commanding passion wonders, if indeed he were at a leisure to wonder, at the persons who pretend to attach importance to an object which they make none but the most languid efforts to secure. The utmost powers of the man are constrained into the service of the favourite cause of this passion, which sweeps away as it advances all the trivial objections and little opposing motives, and seem almost to open a way through impossibilities” (103).

42. These are the words of the newly elected regent, Morton, over the grave of John Knox. M’Crie, *Life of John Knox*, 347.

43. John Foster, *Decision of Character* (New York: Robert Carter and Bros, 1882) 82–83.

Speaking of Howard he says

“The energy of his determination was so great, that if instead of being habitual, it has been shown only for a short time on particular occasions, it would have appeared a vehement impetuosity; but by being unintermitted, it had an equalability of manner which scarcely appeared to exceed the tone of a calm constancy, it was so totally the reverse of anything like turbulence or agitation. It was the calmness of an intensity kept uniform by the nature of a human mind forbidding it to be more, and by the character of the individual forbidding it to be less. The habitual passion of his mind was in a pitch of excitement and impulsion, almost equal to the temporary extremes and paroxysms of common minds, as a great river in its customary state is equal to a small or moderate one, when swollen to a torrent” (107).

“The moment of finishing his plans in deliberation and commencing them in action was the same. I wonder what must have been the amount of that bribe in emoluments or pleasure that would have detained a week inactive, after their final adjustments. The law which carries water down a declivity was not more unconquerable and invariable than the determination of his feelings towards the main object. The importance of this object held his faculties in a state of determination was too rigid to be affected by lighter interests, and on which, therefore, the beauties of nature and art had no power ...” (Foster, 107).

“In almost all plans of great enterprise, a man must systematically dismiss at the entrance every wish to stipulate with his destiny for safety. He voluntarily treads within the precincts of danger; and though it be possible he may escape, he ought to be prepared with the fortitude of a self-devoted victim. This is the inevitable condition on which heroes, travelers, or missionaries among savage nations and reformers on a grand scale, must commence their career. Either they must allay their fire of enterprise, or abide the liability to be exploded by it from the world. The last decisive energy of a rational courage which confides in the supreme power is very sublime; it makes a man who intrepidly dares everything that can oppose or attack him, within the whole sphere of mortality; who will still press towards his object while death is impending over him; who would retain his purpose unshaken amidst the ruins of the world” (Foster, 113).

Although Foster, as I have said already, does not refer

to John Knox in the course of his essay, there have been few men in any age to whom his striking descriptions so emphatically apply.

The other great feature in the character of our great Reformer was an entire, abjuration [*sic*; more likely “adjuration” was intended] of self in questions of religious principle, and a submission of every question to the authority of the Word of God. When one of the emissaries of Rome exclaimed that in accordance with this principle he would leave them “no church,” “Yes,” rejoined Knox boldly, “in David I read of the Church of malignants *odi ecclesiam malignantium*; this church you may have without the word and fighting against it. Of this church if you will be I cannot hinder you, but as for me I will be of no other church but that which has Jesus Christ for pastor, hears his voice and will not hear the voice of a stranger.”⁴⁴

(2) Such being the man and such the leading principle which he maintained, let us now look at the great work which God accomplished mainly by his instrumentality. This work was partly destructive and partly constructive.

Knox was raised up by God as a mighty instrument in overthrowing the gigantic system of superstition and idolatry which at that time stood entrenched in Scotland, shutting out the light of the Gospel truth, and subverting the foundations of human hope. The highest object of our great Reformer was that the Word of the Lord might have free course and be glorified. Time would fail were we to enter into details, nor is it necessary to refer minutely to the nature of Popery. It is a formidable conspiracy as Adam Smith has said, against the religion and liberties of mankind.⁴⁵ It destroys true religion, and lays the axe to the root of liberty and of social morality. In Scotland, before the days of Knox, it was extremely powerful, and manifested its most repulsive features. No doubt it had been weakened by the satires of Sir David Lindsay and others, and by, its own bloody cruelty, especially in the murder of Patrick Hamilton and George Wishart. Still John Knox struck the first deadly blow at this gigantic fabric by taking up the ground that it was the foredoomed apostasy of Daniel, Paul, and John. “As for your Roman Church as it is now corrupted,” said he, “wherein stands the hope of your victory. I no more doubt that it is the synagogue of Satan

44. John Knox, *History of the Reformation in Scotland* (1733) 91–92.

45. “... the church of Rome may be considered as the most formidable combination that ever was formed against the authority and security of civil government, as well as against the liberty, reason, and happiness of mankind, which can flourish only where civil government is able to protect them.” Smith, *Wealth of Nations*. 5.1. (1843) 337.

and the head thereof called the Pope to be the Man of Sin of whom the apostle speaks, than I doubt that Jesus Christ suffered by the procurement of the visible church of Jerusalem. Yea, I offer myself by word or writing to prove the Roman Church this day, farther degenerate from the purity which was in the days of the apostles, than was the church of the Jews from the ordinances given by Moses, when they consented to the innocent death of Jesus Christ" (M'Crie, 36–37).⁴⁵

By the firm maintenance of this doctrine the Scottish Reformation was secured, and therefore it was more thorough and complete than similar movements in any other part of Europe. It, however, was accomplished in the face of overwhelming difficulties, and especially in the face of Royal and courtly opposition. The determined firmness and plainness of speech of our great Reformer has been the occasion of much unfounded attack. To a mind rightly constituted the boldness of Knox in such circumstances approached to absolute sublimity, and it is well for us and for all generations of Scotchmen that the slavish principles which many now advocate had no existence in his intrepid mind. The whole history of the world proves that liberty has only been secured by men under the influence of Christian principle. Knox was the true predecessor and example of the Puritans of England, whilst the Puritans of England were the true founders of British and American liberty, both civil and religious. Speaking of these remarkable men and their achievements, Macaulay says, in language which exhibits the true spirit, which enabled Knox to speak to monarchs in the gate—

"The Puritans were men whose minds had derived character from the daily contemplation of superior beings and eternal interests. Not content with acknowledging in general terms an overruling Providence, they habitually ascribed every event to the will of the great being for whose power nothing was too vast for whose inspection nothing was too minute. To know him, to serve him, to enjoy him was with them the great end of existence. They rejected with contempt the ceremonious homage which other sects substituted for the pure worship of the soul. Instead of catching occasional glimpses of the Deity through an obscuring veil, they aspired to gaze full on his intolerable brightness, and to commune with him face to face. Hence originated their contempt for terrestrial distinctions. The differences between the

greatest and the meanest of mankind seemed to vanish when compared with the boundless interval which separated the whole race from him on whom their own eyes were constantly fixed. They recognised no title to superiority but his favour, and confident of that favour they despised all the accomplishments and all the dignities of the world. If they were unacquainted with the works of philosophers and poets, they were deeply read in the oracles of God. If their names were not found in the registers of heralds, they were recorded in the book of life. If their steps were not accompanied by a splendid train of menials, legions of ministering angels had charge over them. Their palaces were houses not made with hands, their diadems crowns of glory, which should never fade away. On the rich and the eloquent, on nobles and priests, they looked down with contempt, for they esteemed themselves rich in a more precious treasure, and eloquent in a more sublime language, nobles by the right of an earlier creation, and priests by the imposition of a mightier hand. The very meanest of them was a being to whose fate a mysterious and terrible importance belonged; on whose slightest action the spirits of light and darkness looked with anxious interest, who had been destined before heaven and earth were created—to enjoy a felicity which should continue when heaven and earth should have passed away."⁴⁶

This contains a partly exaggerated, but, in the main, a true representation of the spirit which animated Knox, and made everything shrink into insignificance in comparison of the great and holy object upon which his heart was set. His spirit was that of the Psalmist: "I'll speak thy word to kings, and I with shame shall not be moved: and will delight myself always in thy laws which I loved." But even this, after all, is an inadequate representation of the object and result of that portentous struggle. It is now admitted on all hands that the true principles of civil and religious liberty were, although with undoubted imperfections, first broached by Knox and his fellow-labourers, and that the English Puritans and the Scottish Covenanters were only their pupils. These principles at length became paramount, and were carried out so far into practical accomplishment at the Revolution of 1688. Our present Constitution stands upon them. Its great principles are a limited monarchy and the Protestant succession-government, not as an arbitrary and conventional arrangement for the gratification of individual caprice, but as a Divine ordinance established for the glory of God and the public good, and who can tell how many thousands of immortal souls will have cause to bless God through all eternity for this?

45. Cf. Knox, *History of the Reformation in Scotland*, ed. William M'Gavin (Blackie: 1831) 65; Knox, *Works*, ed. David Laing, 1.189.

46. From Macaulay's essay "On Milton," as first published in the *Edinburgh Review*, August, 1825.

When this great man, therefore, in circumstances of peculiar difficulty, and amidst the desertion of friends, was bringing strange things to the ears of Queen Mary, he was laying in the strongest manner the true foundations of civil and religious liberty, in connection with which alone the Word of God has had free course and been glorified. In his interview with the Queen, trained in Popish and arbitrary principles at Loch Leven, he declared that if the laws were executed, the Protestants would be satisfied, but not other wise. The Queen exclaimed, "Will ye allow that they shall take my sword in their hands?" "The sword of justice is God's," calmly replied the Reformer, "and is given to princes and rulers for one end, which, if they transgress, sparing the wicked and oppressing the innocent—they who, in the fear of God, execute judgment where God has commanded, offend not God although kings do it not." Again, "It shall be profitable to your Majesty to consider what is the thing your Grace's subjects look to receive of your Majesty, and what it is that ye ought to do to them by mutual contract. They are bound to obey you, and that not but in God; ye are bound to keep laws to them. Ye crave of them service; they crave of you protection and defence against wicked doers. Now, Madam, if ye shall deny your duty unto them (which especially craves that ye punish malefactors) think ye to receive full obedience of them? I fear, Madam, ye shall not." (M'Crie, 252–253)

"What are you in this commonwealth?" exclaimed Mary on another occasion. "A subject born within the same," said Knox; "and albeit, I be neither Earl, Lord, nor Baron in it, yet God has made me (how abject that ever I be in your eyes) a profitable member within the same. Yea, Madam, to me it appertains no less to forewarn of such things as may hurt it, if I foresee them, than it doth to any of the nobility, for both my vocation and conscience require plainness of me" (M'Crie, 259).

The work of Knox in overthrowing the Romish system in Scotland was nearly perfect. To this great work he brought untiring energy, a deep insight into all the springs of human action, and a courage that never quailed. Now that the dust of battle is swept aside, our most distinguished historians fully recognise his singular power, and the great work which God enabled him to achieve amidst unspeakable difficulties. This work also he watched over with untiring faithfulness and amazing sagacity to the end of his days.

Speaking of Knox, Froude says: "The object of the Scottish nobles was political, national, patriotic. For religion, it was no great matter either way; and as they had before acted with the Protestants, so now they were ready to turn about, and openly or tacitly act with the

Catholics. Mary Stuart's friends in England and on the Continent were Catholics, and therefore it would not do to offend them. First, she was allowed to have mass at Holyrood; then there was a move for a broader toleration. That one mass, Knox said, was more terrible to him than 10,000 armed men landed in this country; and he had good reason for saying so. He thoroughly understood that it was the first step towards a counter-revolution, which in time would cover all Scotland and England, and carry them back to Popery. Yet he preached to deaf ears.... Even the ministers of the Kirk were fooled and flattered over. Maitland told Mary Stuart that he had gained them all except one. John Knox alone defied both his threats and his persuasions. Good reason has Scotland to be proud of Knox. He only in this wild crisis saved the Kirk which he had founded, and saved with it Scottish and English freedom.... She (Queen Elizabeth) would still say nothing—promise nothing, bind herself to nothing; and so far as she was concerned, the war would have been soon enough brought to a close. But away at St Andrews, John Knox, broken in body, and scarcely able to stagger up the pulpit stairs, still thundered in the parish church, and his voice, it was said, was like ten thousand trumpets braying in the ears of Scottish Protestantism. All the Lowlands thrilled under his tones."⁴⁷ We may apply to this great man the language of the poet—"Like some tall cliff that rears its lofty form, Above the vale and midway meets the storm; Though round its breast the gathering clouds are spread, Eternal sunshine settles on its head."⁴⁸

What matter all clouds of reproach and misrepresentation to Knox now? They have all been swept away forever, and the grandeur of his work and of the man himself as a signal instrument in the hand of God, have come out into clear and noble development. "The righteous shall be in everlasting remembrance; the memory of the wicked shall rot."

So much for the first work of Knox. The work of our great Reformer, however, did not consist merely in overturning arbitrary government and sweeping out of Scotland the mass of idolatry and superstition by which it had been previously encumbered, but in reconstructing

47. Cf. James Anthony Froude, *Short Studies on Great Subjects* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1868) 139–140, 143–144.

48. Begg is somewhat misquoting four lines from Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* which should read: "As some tall cliff that lifts its awful form, / Swells from the vale, and midway leaves the storm, / Though round its breast the rolling clouds are spread, / Eternal sunshine settles on its head." *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 1983) 475.

the Church and civil society of the country on Scriptural foundations. The old Scots Confession, and the First Book of Discipline—chiefly his works—are noble monuments of his Christian sagacity and ripe judgment. The wide circulation of these books at present, as well as of his noble “History of the Reformation,” could not fail to be productive of the best results. The mass of the Scotch people, we suspect, have never seen these interesting documents, and without seeing them, it is impossible to understand the history of our country, or how much we owe under God to John Knox and to the Reformation. Let us cull a few extracts from the First Book of Discipline.

“With the Apostle we affirm, that all Scripture inspired of God is profitable to instruct, to reprove, and to exhort, in which books of the Old and New Testament, we affirm that everything necessary for the instruction of the Church, and to make the man of God perfect, is contained and sufficiently expressed. By the contrary doctrine, we understand whatsoever men by law, councils, or constitutions have imposed upon the consciences of men without the express commandment of God’s Word.”⁴⁹

Now, here is a principle of the widest interest. Like a great broad axe it is sufficient to cut down at once the whole upas tree of superstition and idolatry. It restores the true Lord of the Church to his rightful place, and sets aside all usurpers. “Let God be true and every man a liar” [Rom. 3:4]. “To the law and the testimony, if they speak not according to this word it is because there is no light in them” [Isa. 8:20]. It goes deeper than the Reformation of Luther. Many things may not be in opposition to any direct Scripture text, which still are unworthy of God and truth, and we only reach the true foundation when we demand an express warrant or commandment of God’s Word, as “Thus saith the Lord” for all that we do or say in the Christian Church. Again, “It appertaineth to the people, and to every several congregation to elect their minister” ... (FBD, 96). “That the life and conversation of the person presented or to be elected may be more clearly known, public edicts should be directed to all parts of this realm, or at least to those parts where the person hath been most conversant, as where he was nourished in letters, or where he continued since the years of infancy and childhood were passed ...” (FBD, 100–101).

“The minister elected or presented examined, and as said, is publicly admitted, may neither leave the flock at

his pleasure to which he hath promised his fidelity and labours, neither yet may the flock reject or change him at their appetite, unless they be able to convict him of such crimes as deserve deposition ...” (FBD, 103). “The chiefest remedy left to your honours and to us in all this rarity of true ministers, is fervent prayer unto God, that it will please His mercy to thrust forth faithful workmen into his harvest ...” (104).

“Seeing that of our Master Christ Jesus and his Apostle Paul, we have that the workman is worthy of his reward, and that the mouth of the labouring ox ought not to be muzzled; of necessity it is, that honest provision be made for the ministers which we require to be such, that they have neither occasion of solicitude, neither yet of insolency and wantonness, and this provision must be made not only for their own sustentation during their lives, but also for their wives and children after them, for we judge it a thing most contrarious to reason, godliness, and equity, that the widow and the children of him who, in his life, did faithfully serve the Kirk of God, and for that cause did not carefully make provision for his family, should after his death be left comfortless of all provision ...” (FBD, 108).

The great question of pauperism, which baffles our statesmen, was handled with much wisdom by Knox, as a matter in which the Christian Church is deeply interested. After much experience on the subject, I am convinced that, in addition to the parochial system properly applied, the application of his distinction between those who become poor in the course of Providence, and those who make themselves poor by their own misconduct, affords the only hopeful solution of this overwhelming problem. The first class are few, comparatively, the other class may be indefinitely multiplied, to the utter ruin of society, as well as of themselves. “I have been young,” said David, “and am old, yet I never saw the righteous man forsaken” [Ps. 37:25]. He does not say it never happened, but it is comparatively rare.

Hear the wise words of Knox :

“Fearful and horrible it is that the poor whom not only God the Father in his law, but Christ Jesus in his Evangel, and the Holy Spirit speaking by St Paul, hath so earnestly commended to our care, are universally so contemned and despised. We are not patrons for stubborn and idle beggars, who, running from place to place, make a craft of their begging, whom the civil magistrate ought to compel to work, or then punish; but for the widow and fatherless, the aged, impotent, or lamed,

49. Cf. John Knox, *The First Book of Discipline*, ed. James Cameron (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1972) 87–88. Hereafter FBD.

who neither can nor may travel for their sustentation, we say that God commands his people to be careful, and therefore for such, as also for persons of honesty, fallen into decay and poverty, ought such provision to be made, that of our abundance their indigence may be relieved" (*FBD*, 112–113).

His grand principles of Christian education, however, are of special importance at the present moment.⁵⁰ It is outrageous to hear men quoting Knox in favour of systems of education which he would have emphatically disowned. Let them produce, if they can, any commonwealth of greatness reared by mere secular teaching, but never let them utter in that connection the name of our great Reformer. The truth is, the attempt to separate the moral from the intellectual nature of children is simply preposterous and profane. It is an attempt to separate what God has united; and it must prove equally cruel to the children and disastrous to the commonwealth. I earnestly trust that the Scottish people, now that this immense interest is committed to their care, will discharge their trust in such a way as, by the Divine blessing, to confer unspeakable advantages on the generations yet to come. The words of Knox should be written equally above the senate and the school-house....

"Seeing that God hath determined that His kirk here on earth shall be taught not by angels but by men, and seeing that men are born ignorant of God and of all godliness, and seeing also He ceases to illuminate men miraculously, suddenly changing them as He did the Apostles and others in the primitive kirk; of necessity it is that your honors be most careful for the virtuous education and godly upbringing of the youth of this realm, if either ye now thirst unfeignedly the advancement of Christ's glory, or yet desire the continuance of His benefits to the generation following" (*FBD*, 112–113).

Our Reformer, however, had as elevated conceptions of the higher as of common education. With a noble conception of the brotherhood of man, an earnest desire to diffuse the light of the highest knowledge universally—a determination, if possible, to place the ladder of learning at every poor man's door, so that his sons, if talented, might climb to the highest positions in the Church and Commonwealth, Knox proclaimed that in addition to the universities colleges for learning should be found everywhere. This noble idea has never been realized. It has not even existed in England, and now we are threatened with its entire suppression if our people do not firmly resist.

Here are our Reformer's words :

"And further, we think it expedient that in every notable town, and specially in the town of the superintendent, there be erected a college in which the Arts, at least logic and rhetoric, together with the tongues, be read by sufficient masters, for whom honest stipends must be appointed—as also that provision be made for those that be poor and not able by themselves nor by their friends to be sustained at letters, an in special those that come from landward" (*FBD*, 131).

John Knox, however, had in every respect a most healthy and Christian spirit, and there is nothing more affecting than the deep interest which he took in the working classes—the true base of the social pyramid. He addresses one of his noble letters "to his beloved brethren the commonalty of Scotland" [cf. Laing, *Works*, 4:521] and whilst most assuredly he would not have countenanced them in any folly, he was most anxious that justice should be done on all sides, and that all classes of the community should be united together by a feeling of common interest and by the exercise of kindly offices. He says:—

... "We must crave of your honors in the name of the eternal God and of his Son, Christ Jesus, that ye have respect to your poor brethren, the labourers and murtherers of the ground...."

"With the grief of our hearts we hear that some gentlemen are now as cruel over their tenants as ever were the Papiſts requiring of them the teinds and whatsoever they afore paid to the kirk, so that the Papiſtical tyranny shall only be changed into the tyranny of the lord and laird. We dare not flatter your honors, neither yet is it profitable for you that we so do; for neither shall we if we permit cruelty to be used, neither shall ye who by your authority ought to gainsay such oppression, nor yet they that use the same escape God's heavy and fearful judgments" (*FBD*, 156–157).

There is great largeness of view and the true spirit of Christian statesmanship in the main principles laid down in this remarkable book. Its wise maxims have never been fully carried out; but in so far as they have been, the greatest good has resulted to Scotland. In the

50. It was in this year that the government in London introduced The Education (Scotland) Act transferring the responsible for education from the church to the state and establishing compulsory education for 5–13 year olds.

principles thus proclaimed will be found a true exhibition of Christian statesmanship, and the only solution of our urgent social problems. No better improvement could be made of the present occasion, which has aroused the interest of all Scotland, than in attempting to secure a practical acknowledgment and adoption of the principles of our great Reformer.

It is worthy of remark at the same time as proving the magnanimity of Knox, that although thus most earnestly engaged in promoting the highest interests of his native land, he was also deeply concerned for the spiritual prosperity of England. When he saw that the alternative was between the Reformers of England and the Church of Rome, he did not scruple to give his most strenuous support to the Episcopalian Protestants of England.

He did this, of course, without compromising his own decided views; yet he helped to improve the Liturgy, and revise the articles, although he refused a bishopric when it was offered him, and thus gave a proof of disinterestedness which some of our modern declaimers who swim with the tide have not given. He certainly could distinguish things that differed, and rising above the crowd of pigmies around him, he made common cause with the great Protestant family of Britain, and thus succeeded in baffling the Pope and his emissaries. The following extract from the *Life of John Knox* by M'Crie may be read with advantage by some modern Presbyterians:

"In December, 1551, the Privy Council conferred on him a mark of their approbation, by appointing him one of King Edward's Chaplains in ordinary.... In the course of this year, Knox was consulted about the Book of Common Prayer, which was undergoing a revisal. On that occasion it is probable that he was called up for a short time to London. Although the persons who had the chief direction of ecclesiastical affairs were not disposed, or did not deem it as yet expedient, to introduce that thorough reform which he judged necessary, in order to reduce the worship of the English Church to the Scripture model, his representations on this head were not altogether disregarded. He had influence to procure an important change in the Communion Office, completely excluding the notion of the corporal presence of Christ in the sacrament, and guarding against the adoration of the elements which was too much countenanced by the practice still continued of kneeling at their reception. In his Admonition to the Professors

of the Truth in England, Knox speaks of these amendments with great satisfaction. 'Also gave great boldness and knowledge to the court of Parliament, to take away the round-clipped god, wherein standeth all the holiness of the Papiſts, and to command common bread to be used at the Lord's Table, and also to take away the most part of superstitions, (kneeling at the Lord's Table excepted,) which before profaned Christ's true religion.' These alterations gave great offence to the Papiſts. In a disputation with Latimer, after the accession of Queen Mary, the prolocutor, Dr Weston, complained of our countryman's influence in procuring them. 'A runagate Scot did take away the adoration or worshipping of Christ in the Sacrament, by whose procurement that heresy was put into the last Communion Book; so much prevailed that one man's authority at that time.' In the following year he was employed in revising the Articles of Religion previous to their ratification by Parliament" (M'Crie, *Life of John Knox*, 52-54).

John Knox at a subsequent period invoked successfully the aid of England to repel the aggressions of Popish France, and thus in a sense made common cause with those from whom he widely differed, when the religion and liberties of the country were at stake. For this he has since received the highest commendations of enlightened historians, but the most undying hatred of the emissaries of Rome.

The work of Knox, however, has greatly fallen into decay, and, indeed, is threatened with entire overthrow. Romanism is now more defiant than ever amidst its apparent weakness. It proclaims the most persecuting and intolerant principles from the Vatican Council, and it has at length invested the Pope with one of the attributes of God.⁵¹ With stealthy and wary steps it is finding its way back to Britain. It already has great influence in our legislation, and at present receives half a million of money annually from the British Government. It is seeking and obtaining power in the Church of England, and its emissaries, driven from the land of Luther, are finding easy access to the lands of Cranmer and Knox. Protestants are asleep, divided, and inactive, and many who claim descent from Knox repudiate his principles. Professing to seek union and progress they are blindly disowning what was specially vital in the old Reformation struggle—the universal supremacy of Christ and the necessity for Bible teaching. They are also shaking the whole foundations of truth by the theory of open questions, which shifts the ground of faith from divine authority to human opinion, and in connection with which no spirit of martyrdom or mighty struggles for

51. The First Vatican Council which met from 1869-70 defined Papal Infallibility.

truth could ever have been possible. Knox would have repudiated all such theories. It is one thing to build the tombs of the prophets, and quite another to adhere steadfastly to their principles. No one can fail to observe the attempt made in some quarters to separate between Knox and his principles. To commemorate a man, apart from principles, is sheer idolatry. But the tendency referred to arises partly from ignorance, and partly from the fact that of late years, some who would fain claim a descent from Knox have entirely abandoned the ground on which he stood and conquered. One of his leading principles was, that the nation in its corporate capacity was bound to honour and serve God, and that Church and State were inseparably connected. He says in the Scots Confession of 1560:

“Moreover, to kings, princes, rulers, and magistrates we affirm that chiefly and most principally the conservation and purgation of the religion appertains, so that not only they are appointed for civil policy, but also for maintenance of the true religion, and for suppressing of idolatry and superstition whatsoever, as in David, Jehosaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah, and others highly commended for their zeal, in that case may be espied.”⁵²

His theory of Scriptural education in the common schools was also utterly inconsistent with Voluntaryism. There can be little doubt that upon the principles now maintained by some we never could have had a Reformation, and that if such principles ever acquire supremacy, the days of our Reformation are numbered. Voluntaryism has manifested little zeal and no power against Rome. The theory of national indifferentism in regard to religion, is manifestly atheistical in spirit, and most ruinous in result. Nations cannot be neutral. Their pretended neutrality is treated by Christ as direct hostility. He declares that “The nation and kingdom that will not serve His church shall perish, those nations shall be utterly wasted.” Nay, God may yet employ our very old enemy which many treat so lightly as the means of our punishment.

“Make peace if you will with Popery,” says an eloquent English preacher, “receive it into your Senate, shrine it in your Churches, plant it in your hearts—but be ye certain, as certain as that there is a heaven above you and a God over you, that the Popery thus honoured and embraced is the very Popery that was degraded and loathed by the holiest of your fathers; the very Popery, the same in haughtiness, the same in intolerance, which lorded over kings, assumed the prerogative of Deity, crushed human liberty, and slew the saints of God.”⁵³

Events have fully illustrated the wisdom of Knox and

the goodness of God, in giving him and the Reformation to Scotland. It is most striking, moreover, that after lying for generations under a load of unmerited obloquy, God has not only wiped away his reproach, but constrained his very enemies to speak in his praise. Perhaps, in the whole history of the world there has never been a more remarkable fulfillment of the promise of Scripture, “Commit thy way unto the Lord ; trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass, and He shall bring forth thy righteousness as the light, and thy judgment as the noon-day” [Ps. 37:5–6].

Can we not make the present a blessed opportunity of repenting and doing the first works? On the broad and Scriptural foundations of the old Reformation there is a noble meeting-place for all classes of patriotic Scotchmen, and amidst our distractions we may well hear the voice which still speaks to us from this honoured grave. Knox, in one of his noble sermons, says:

“Would’st thou O Scotland have a king to reign over thee in justice, equity, and mercy? Subject thyself to the Lord thy God, obey his commandments and magnify thou that word that calleth unto thee, ‘This is the way, walk ye in it.’ And if thou wilt not, flatter not thyself. The same justice remaineth this day in God to punish thee Scotland, and thee, Edinburgh, in especial, that before punished the land of Judah and the city of Jerusalem. Every realm and nation (saith the prophet Jeremy) that likewise offendeth, shall be likewise punished. But if thou shalt see impiety placed in the seat of justice above thee, so that in the throne of God (as Solomon doth complain) reigneth nothing, but fraud and violence accuse thy own ingratitude and rebellion, for that is the only cause why God taketh away (as the same prophet in another place doth speak) the strong man and the man of war, the judge and the prophet, the prudent and the aged, the captain and the honourable, the counsellor and the cunning artificer. And I will appoint, saith the Lord, children to be their princes, and babes shall rule over them.... If these calamities I say, apprehend us, so that we see nothing but the oppression of good men and of all godliness and wicked men, without God reign above us, let us accuse and condemn ourselves as the only cause of our own miseries. For if we had heard the voice of the Lord our God and given upright obedience unto the same, God should have multiplied our peace, and should have rewarded our obedience before

52. John Knox, *The Scots Confession*, ed. G. D. Henderson (1560; repr., Edinburgh: Church of Scotland, 1937) 95.

53. Canon Henry Melvill, quoted in the July 1870 edition of the *The Bulwark* of which Begg was the editor.

the eyes of the world.” [Cf. Laing, “A Sermon on Isaiah XXVI. 13.-21, preached in St. Giles’s Church, Edinburgh, 19. August M.D.LXV.,” *Works*, 6.241-242].

“But be of good courage O little and despised flock of Christ Jesus, for he seeth your grief, and hath power to revenge it” [Cf. Laing, 6.272].

My dear friends, let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter. Let us give all diligence to make our calling and election sure. Let us seek refuge under the covert of atoning blood; and in doing good to all as we have opportunity let us desire to be followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises, implicitly trusting in our glorious heavenly King and

Master. Let us seek to be enabled to obey His will, fully to confess Him before men, and to rejoice even to be counted worthy to suffer for His sake. The times are strange, and they threaten, in the language of one of old, to be times of “much suffering or of much sinning.” But the great Master is ever the same. He can raise up new instruments to maintain His cause, He can, in answer to prayer, defeat the counsels of wicked or misguided men, arm His servants with the necessary wisdom, fortitude, and patience, and dash His enemies to pieces like a potter’s vessel. Blessed are all they and only they that trust in Him. “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord” [1 Cor. 15:58].■



“Portrait of John Knox in Beza’s Incones.” Frontispiece, P. Hume Brown, *John Knox A Biography* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1895).