THE SCOTTISH REFORMATION

THE RISE OF JOHN KNOX

Prayer
Scripture: John 17
Hymn: 524 "Unto the Hills"

THE BIRTH OF JOHN KNOX:

John Knox, the hero of the Scottish Reformation, was born in or near Haddington in the year 1513—neither year nor place are beyond dispute. Thomas Carlyle had a tree planted at the probable birthplace in Giffordgate, Haddington. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century the house in which popular tradition said he was born and a few acres of land were owned by a family named Knox who claimed kinship with him. Haddington in 1198 had been the birthplace of King Alexander II.

Knox's parents were respectable peasants. His father, William Knox, was probably a small farmer but prosperous enough that John received a good liberal education according to the standards of that day. John Knox once told the Earl of Bothwell that his grandparents, paternal and maternal, had served Bothwell's predecessors, and some of them had died under the Bothwell standards. John's mother, who died when he was only a child, was a Sinclair, a clan with a reputation for pride of race. Sometimes John used the name, Sinclair, in signing letters when it was dangerous to use his own name. His father married again. John's brother, William, became a well-to-do merchant at Preston in East Lothian. He owned his own ship and traded with the English. He had three sons who became ministers of the Church of Scotland. He was a sincere adherent of the Reformed faith.

Haddington was located on the main road leading from England to Edinburgh, the capital, about eighteen miles east of Edinburgh. It was exposed to frequent English raids. Twice it had been burned by the English before Knox was born; during his time it was besieged by the French. It was a notable ecclesiastical center. One mile east of the town was a Cistercian Abbey, founded in 1170 by Ada, the mother of William the Lion. Within the town was a church consecrated to the Virgin Mary that had been built before 1134. The town had three chapels dedicated respectively to St. John, St. Catherine, and St. Anne. On the east of the Nungate was a chapel of St. Martin. It had a church and a monastery belonging to the Blackfriars. The pride of the city was the thirteenth century church of the Greyfriars known as "The Lamp of Lothian." When it was burned by the English, John Knox's teacher, John Major, hinted that it was God's judgment against the wealth of the Scottish religious houses. It was not right for religious orders devoted to holy poverty to possess churches of such splendor. John Major, though critical of the papacy and an advocate of Conciliar reform, remained in the Roman church.

THE EDUCATION OF JOHN KNOX:

Haddington had a good grammar school. Walter Bower, the historian, was born in Haddington in 1385 and probably received his early schooling in this grammar school. Knox's teacher, John Major, was a product of this school. Knox acquired his facility for speaking and writing Latin here.

At the age of seventeen Knox entered the University of St. Andrews where John Major, the most famous professor in Scotland, was his teacher. George Buchanan, who became the foremost Humanist of Scotland, was a
contemporary and also a pupil of Major. The curriculum of the university was still the old medieval curriculum of Latin and the Schoolmen. Knox mastered Latin in which university instruction was given and which was the language of intercourse among the learned. He studied for the priesthood, learning something of the church fathers and church history. Renaissance learning that had swept through the continent had barely touched Scotland—it was years behind the continent. A little of the Renaissance had reached the university. Also some of Luther's books and ideas were known and discussed. The burning of Patrick Hamilton two years before Knox entered the university had made a deep impression and students still asked, "Wherefore was Master Hamilton burned?"

John Knox did not take a degree. He would be known as "Sir John Knox", the designation of a nongraduate priest. Those who took a degree were designated "Master." As a peasant he could hardly hope for a good parish. He would be a clerk and notary—a cog in the ecclesiastical wheel—supplementing this work with the tutoring of boys.

THE COMPLEX SITUATION IN SCOTLAND AND KNOX'S SILENT YEARS:

We know little of the years he served as a notary and tutor except that he turned away from the Schoolmen and read Jerome and Augustine. These led him to a study of Scripture. Sometime during this period he was ordained as a priest of the Church of Rome. One document survives in which he signed himself, in Latin, "John Knox, minister of the Sacred Altar, of the diocese of St. Andrews, notary by Papal Authority." Knox later testified that the passage of the Word of God on which he "cast his first anchor" was the seventeenth chapter of John. During these years of obscurity we can only guess at what was happening inside his heart and mind. There were good reasons for his quietly continuing in the service of the old church rather than casting his lot with those who favored the Reformation.

Knox was following in the steps of his teacher, John Major, whom he greatly admired. Major may have taught at Glasgow in the early 1520's. He taught at St. Andrews from 1523 to 1525. Then he spent six years teaching and studying in Paris where some called him the "Prince of Paris Masters." He returned to St. Andrews in 1531 where he became an oracle in matters of religion. In France he had been the leader of the ecclesiastical party that united loyalty to Roman doctrine with opposition to papal despotism and corruption. In Scotland he held the same position. He taught that kings received their power from the people and existed for the people's good and not the people for the king's good. He was critical of papal bans and denounced clerical abuses. He defended transubstantiation, saint-worship, celibacy for the priests; he had no sympathy for Hamilton's reformation ideas. Major's influence was enough to hold Knox back from Reformation.

Hamilton's death was followed by strong action against heresy. Archbishop James Beaton and his nephew, David Beaton, during the fourteen years between the death of Hamilton and the death of James V in 1542 carried on a kind of inquisition against Reformed views. Parliament passed strict laws to keep Lutheran ideas out of Scotland. There were numerous martyrdoms of priests, friars and laymen. Many escaped death by flight and exile. Many who sympathized with Reform remained silent.

The political situation held many loyal Scotsmen back from Reformation. Knox was warmly and deeply patriotic to his homeland. Reformation tended to be associated with disloyalty. For years
Scotland had been torn between alliance with England and alliance with France. After the marriage of James IV to Margaret Tudor in 1503 one Scottish party favored friendly relations with England. James V's efforts to break the power of the Scottish nobles caused the nobility to look to Henry VIII for support against James V and his French allies. When Henry VIII broke with Rome this caused those who favored Reformation in Scotland to look to Henry VIII. Henry VIII wanted to win James V and Scotland away from France and he proposed a marriage of his daughter Mary to James V. After the death of James V he proposed betrothing his son Edward to the infant Mary Stuart. To many patriotic Scotsmen it was plain that the old enemy, England, was trying to get the Scottish king in their power. The Beatons and the Scottish hierarchy pushed the alliance with France to keep England from absorbing Scotland. Many Scotsmen were influenced more by patriotic feeling than by Protestant conviction. The Reformed party lost support because of association with the unpatriotic English party who wanted Henry VIII crowned in Edinburgh. The Earl of Bothwell even plotted with the Earl of Northumberland, Henry's agent, to furnish seven thousand Scottish troops when Henry invaded Scotland. Patriotic Scotsmen could tolerate Cardinal Beaton if it would prevent annexation by England.

About 1537 a quiet but scholarly teacher of Greek in Montrose, a small east-coast town to the south of Aberdeen attracted the attention of the Catholic authorities. His name was George Wishart, the son or nephew of a laird of Pitarrow in Kincardineshire. The authorities learned that he was reading the Greek New Testament with his pupils. He was cited to appear before the Bishop of Brechin. Wishart fled to England. He became a wandering scholar, visiting Germany and Switzerland. He returned to England and became a tutor in the University of Cambridge. He was a teacher who delighted in teaching. He was greatly admired and praised by his pupils.

When King James V died in December 1542 there was found on his person a long list of nobility and gentry, prepared by Cardinal Beaton, with a view to their being prosecuted and their property confiscated. Beaton also produced a signed will appointing him regent during the minority of Mary Stuart. Beaton was determined to end Henry VIII's designs on Scotland and to keep the government in his own hands. The nobles believed Beaton had forged the will, and that he intended to rid the Court of every man who did not belong to his party. The nobles put aside their jealousies and differences and appointed the Earl of Arran to be Regent, a man thought to be strongly against Rome and France. Cardinal Beaton was arrested and imprisoned.

In the last days of James V Beaton had pushed the King to have Parliament pass repressive statutes prohibiting private meetings to discuss Scripture, making it a crime to help or harbor persons cited to answer heresy charges, and imposing the death penalty for questioning the authority of the pope. Earlier (in 1535) Parliament had passed a law against the possession of heretical books, including Tyndale's New Testament. With the king's death and the imprisonment of the cardinal a reaction set in against Rome and France. Regent Arran was soon thought to be one of the most fervent Protestants in Europe. In 1543 it became lawful to possess and read the Holy Scripture in the vernacular. The Bible no longer had to be hidden; it was displayed on almost every gentleman's table. In March of 1543 negotiations were renewed for the betrothal of Mary Stuart and Edward VI. The Scotsmen laid down important stipulations: the young Queen of the Scots was not to be removed to England until she had
completed her tenth year; no Scottish fortresses would be surrendered to the English as guarantees as the English had requested; Scotland would remain an independent kingdom under a native ruler; if no issue came from the marriage the Scottish throne would pass to the next Scottish heir. Henry VIII was irritated by these conditions but hoped that in time he could get them removed. The conditions quieted the fears of Scottish patriots who favored Reformation.

JOHN KNOX SHOWS HIS FIRST SYMPATHY FOR PROTESTANT TRUTH:

Regent Arran appointed as his chaplains two evangelical friars, Thomas William of Athelstaneford in East Lothian, a Dominican, and John Rough, not as learned but vehement against all impiety. The chaplains were more than court officials. They travelled about preaching the Word of God. It is thought that John Knox got his first taste and first lively impression of the truth from the preaching of Thomas William in Haddington. He was moved to more earnest study of Holy Scripture. This may have been the time when he first cast his anchor into the seventeenth chapter of John.

THE MARTYRDOM OF GEORGE WISHART:

Hearing of the change in Scotland George Wishart decided to return to his homeland. On his return he found that the Reforming policy of 1543 had been short-lived. Before his return Arran had apostatized and the Cardinal had been restored to power.

The Queen Dowager, Mary of Guise, and the Catholic clergy, were able to put enough pressure on Arran to undo the reforms. They united with the Scotsmen who did not like the Reformation and who preferred the old alliance with France. The Catholics declared the imprisonment of the cardinal was sacrilege. The clergy refused to say mass. Arran's illegitimate brother, John Hamilton, Abbot of Paisley, was brought back from France to warn Arran that his mother's marriage and his own legitimacy depended on the validity of a divorce granted by the pope to his father from a former wife. Should papal authority be repudiated in Scotland, then Arran would be a bastard with no legal claim to earldom and to regency. The Cardinal was released from prison, the Protestant chaplains were dismissed and replaced by Catholic counsellors, the betrothal and alliance with England were renounced. Ten thousand Catholics and French backers demonstrated in Leith. Arran recanted Protestantism and received absolution from the Cardinal. The Scottish Parliament repudiated the marriage proposal in December, 1543, on the pretext that the English had seized some Scottish ships. The English army made a devastating raid into Scotland. The triumphant Cardinal renewed the persecution, especially in Perth and Dundee, known as Protestant strongholds.

Wishart on his return to Scotland began teaching in a private house in Montrose. Soon he was publicly preaching in Dundee, arousing strong ecclesiastical opposition. A priest attempted to assassinate him, but when a mob started to lynch the would-be assassin, Wishart embraced him and stopped the mob saying, "Whosoever troubles him shall trouble me." The hierarchy banished him from Dundee. Wishart went about preaching in east-coast towns. He preached in fields, in churches, on the streets. When he learned that plague had broken out in Dundee he returned to try to minister to the people. Finding that no one was allowed to enter the plague infested city, he climbed upon the wall near the gate and preached to plague stricken people in the city and to the healthy multitude outside. His courage made him the hero of
the people. Hounded by the agents of the church he had to flee to Edinburgh.

Ayrshire lairds who were died-in-the-wool anglicizers—Ayrshire was a stronghold of Protestantism—saw in Wishart prospects of winning Scotland to Protestantism and to alliance with England. They actually had little interest in religion. They feared Scotland was being absorbed by France. They wanted to assassinate Cardinal Beaton. They planned to use Wishart to further their plans. They underestimated the strength of the Catholics and over-estimated the strength of the Protestant cause. Wishart was only interested in preaching truth. When the Catholics excluded him from preaching in the church at Mauchline his followers wanted to force entrance into the church. Wishart declared, "It is the word of peace that God sends by me; the blood of no man shall be shed this day for the preaching of it." The nobles who were backing him for their own purposes urged him to go to Longniddry House, near Edinburgh, where they would gather his sympathizers. He did not know of their plans to overthrow the Cardinal by force.

Early in December, 1545, while waiting for the proposed gathering of his sympathizers, Wishart, against the advice of some of his friends, dared to preach in Leith, almost in the shadow of the Regent's palace. He also preached at Inveresk, a few miles from Edinburgh. It was at Inveresk that John Knox probably first heard Wishart. For some time Knox had been a tutor in the family of Hugh Douglas of Longniddry in Haddingtonshire, about eight miles from Inveresk. For five weeks Wishart preached in the district of Lothian, staying in the house of Douglas. Wishart and Knox became fast friends. Wishart preached with great fervor. Knox accompanied him everywhere, carrying a large two-handed sword. He knew that Wishart was in constant danger. Knox became known as his body-guard. Knox had never heard such preaching. He felt Wishart had no equal on earth. Wishart had just translated into English the Confession of Faith of the Helvetian Churches, prepared by Bullinger for the Congress of Basel in 1536. Knox learned from Wishart something of the Swiss Reformation and his heart was stirred against images, vestments, and unprofitable ceremonies.

Wishart preached his last sermons in Haddington. Large audiences had been expected. On the morning of January 15, 1546 the crowd was disappointingly small. The afternoon audience was even smaller and caused comment. The next afternoon before the sermon Wishart received a letter from the nobles. They were cancelling the proposed meeting of Wishart's followers. Fearing for their own safety they were deserting Wishart to Beaton and his men. Wishart handed the note to Knox, declaring he was weary of the world and men were weary of God. Knox carried the letter to the back of the church to read it so as to leave Wishart to meditate before the sermon. Wishart paced up and down behind the altar. Wishart did not preach the prepared sermon. Instead for an hour and a half he warned Haddington of the judgments of God that would come upon the people because they had not known the time of God's merciful visitation.

Wishart was supposed to travel six miles to the house of Cockburn of Ormiston where he was to spend the night. It was a bad night and the roads were too icy to ride. He would have to walk. Knox was going to go along with his big sword but Wishart ordered him to return to his pupils, saying "one is sufficient for one sacrifice." Knox handed over his sword and they parted.

They did not know that Cardinal Beaton was in the vicinity with
five hundred armed men. At midnight Lord Bothwell arrested Wishart in the Cardinal's name. He was first imprisoned in Bothwell's castle, Elphinstone Tower, then moved to Edinburgh and then to St. Andrews. On the last day of February, the anniversary of Hamilton's execution, he was informed as he lay in chains in the Castle of St. Andrews, that the next day he would be tried before Cardinal Beaton for sedition and heresy.

Cardinal Beaton had invited Archbishop Gavin Dunbar of Glasgow to assist in the trial. The previous June the Cardinal and the Archbishop had fiercely clashed over precedence in the Archbishop's church. While they argued their followers fought. They put this behind them to try a heretic. Wishart was accused of likening a priest saying mass to a fox wagging his tail. Wishart denied the charge, saying that he had declared that the outward moving of the body without the inward moving of the heart was like the playing of an ape and not the true serving of God. Wishart was condemned to be burned the same day, March 1.

Beaton who had received his Cardinal's hat for his zeal against heresy watched the burning from his window. He had ordered all the guns of the Castle aimed at the place of execution to make sure there was no attempt at a rescue. Beaton was an unscrupulous and ambitious churchman who had fathered a large number of sons and daughters whom he had married into noble families. The execution was another triumph for him.

Wishart refused the services of two friars appointed to hear his final confession. He asked for John Winram from a neighbouring friary whom he had heard preach an evangelical sermon. Wishart prayed for the Lord to forgive those who had condemned him. When the executioner fell on his knees begging Wishart's forgiveness, Wishart kissed the executioner on the cheek to assure him he was forgiven and urged him to perform his appointed task.

Wishart's martyrdom moved Scotland more powerfully than his preaching.