

# JOHN KNOX: STALWART COURAGE

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With a Foreword by George Grant

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## FOREWORD TO THE FIRST EDITION

The great nineteenth-century historian Thomas Carlyle, though himself alienated from his native church, was an enthusiastic admirer of its founder, John Knox. Knox was, Carlyle asserted, “quite a surprising individual to have kindled all Scotland, within a few years, almost within few months, into perhaps the noblest flame of sacred human zeal and brave determination to believe only what is found completely believable, and to defy the whole world and the devil at its back, in unsubduable defense of the same.”<sup>1</sup>

Knox was, to Carlyle, the very epitome of stalwart leadership:

1. *Past and Present: The Portraits of John Knox Miscellanies* (Boston: Dana Estes, n.d.), 408.

Here is a gentleman seemingly of a quite eupeptic, not to say stolid and thoughtless frame of mind; much at his ease in Zion, and content to take things as they come, if only they will let him digest his victuals, and sleep in a whole skin. Knox, you can well perceive, in all his writings and in all his way of life, was emphatically of Scottish build; eminently a national specimen; in fact what we might denominate the most Scottish of Scots, and to this day typical of all the qualities which belong nationally to the very choicest Scotsmen we have known, or had a clear record of: utmost sharpness of discernment and discrimination, courage enough, and, what is still better, no particular consciousness of courage, but a readiness in all simplicity to do and dare whatsoever is commanded by the inward voice of native manhood; on the whole a beautiful and simple but complete incompatibility with whatever is false in word or conduct; inexorable contempt and detestation of what in modern speech is called *humbug*. Nothing hypocritical, foolish, or untrue can find harbor in this man; a pure, and mainly silent, tenderness of affection is in him, touches of a genial humor are not wanting under his severe austerity; an occasional growl of sarcastic indignation against malfeasance, falsity, and stupidity; indeed, secretly an extensive fund of that disposition, kept mainly silent, though inwardly in daily exercise; a



## INTRODUCTION

Dorothy Parker, the great American wit, once wrote a poem called “Partial Comfort” that gave vice to a very common assumption about John Knox.

Whose love is given over-well  
Shall look on Helen’s face in hell,  
Whilst they whose love is thin and wise  
May view John Knox in paradise.<sup>1</sup>

The snide slander easily sells; for a number of centuries now John Knox has been a harsh and frightening figure used to keep small children from wandering off into the woods. Jesus taught us that we should beware

1. Dorothy Parker, *The Poetry & Short Stories of Dorothy Parker* (New York: The Modern Library, 1994), 107.

when all men speak well of us; the chastisement implied in our Lord's comment does not appear to apply to John Knox in any way. In this world anyway, Knox is not a figure who would attract universal acclaim.

Even an observer like C.S. Lewis, normally insightful on such matters, comments on Knox as a man who did not understand himself. When Knox lamented his inclination to temporize, Lewis comments, "One is tempted to say that no equal instance of self-ignorance is recorded until the moment at which [Samuel] Johnson pronounced himself 'a very polite man.'"<sup>2</sup> But of course, the two situations are not comparable at all. Johnson, openly rude, thought himself openly polite. Knox, openly courageous and bold, knew his own heart's temptation to shrink from the fight—and he is the only one who *could* know them. The gulf is a wide one that separates self-ignorance from victory over whispering temptations.

Among the historically literate, both his accusers and his defenders frequently share these widespread assumptions about Knox. His attackers write him off as a religious fanatic; his modern defenders are perhaps too prone to defend him as a hard man necessary for hard times. But such a pragmatic defense is hardly Christian. If something is wrong, it is wrong all the time. If it is

2. C.S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 198.

**PART 1:  
THE LIFE OF JOHN  
KNOX**



## CHAPTER 1: UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES

O God, give me Scotland or I die!

*John Knox*

For if the fire be without heat, or the burning lamp without light, then true faith may be without fervent prayer.

*John Knox*

And here I call my God to record that neither profit to myself, hatred of any person or persons, nor affection or favour that I bear towards any private man, causes me this day to speak as you have heard.

*John Knox*

By any reckoning, Scotland was a spiritual badlands. The people were barbaric and superstitious, the clergy were grossly immoral, and rank ignorance of biblical truth

had settled in holy places ostensibly dedicated to the preservation of God's Word. The Church was the center of Scottish medieval life, and that Church was thoroughly corrupt. Of this time, Thomas McCrie observed, "The kingdom swarmed with ignorant, idle luxurious monks, who, like locusts, devoured the fruits of the earth, and filled the air with pestilential infection."<sup>1</sup>

The fact of this ecclesiastical corruption is not a view held only by those sympathetic to the doctrines of the Reformation; the widespread corruption was simply a fact, acknowledged by honest men on both sides. A very able and winsome Roman priest named Ninan Winzet, a strong opponent of Knox, admitted that this gross and blackened condition of the Church provoked the Reformation. He acknowledged that the bishops and clergy in the age prior to the Reformation were "ignorant or vicious, or both," and were "unworthy of the name of pastors."<sup>2</sup>

In this climate of darkness, a young nobleman of royal lineage named Patrick Hamilton became the first prominent martyr of the Reformation in Scotland. Born in 1504, he was set apart to the clergy according to the

1. Thomas McCrie, *Life of John Knox* (Edinburgh and London: W. Blackwood & Sons, 1865), 9.

2. Henry Cowan, *John Knox: The Hero of the Scottish Reformation* (1905; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1970), 15. A short sketch of Winzet's character can be found in C.S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, 202-3.

custom of the times—the abbacy of Ferne bestowed upon him in his childhood. Such livings<sup>3</sup> were not opportunities for feeding the flock of Christ; rather, they were a source of predictable and easy income. Nevertheless, as early as 1526, light began to dawn in his mind. His condemnations of the clerical corruption aroused some suspicion, so he left Scotland to travel on the Continent. An act of Parliament on July 17, 1525 had banned the importation of Luther’s books in Scotland, a land that had always, as they put it, “bene clene of all sic filth and vice [been clean of all such filth and vice].” The connection between the circulation of such material and the dawning light in Patrick Hamilton’s mind is not hard to imagine.

While on the Continent, he found his way to Wittenberg, where he met with both Luther and Melancthon, impressing them both with his zeal. After studying a short time at the university in Marburg, he, being a zealous young man, determined to return to Scotland with the gospel. Upon his arrival, Archbishop Beaton betrayed him and threw him into prison.<sup>4</sup> At his trial, he defended himself with remarkable courage and patience. He was condemned and consigned to the flames on the last day of February in 1528. At this time,

3. In the Church of England, the term *living* means an income as a parish minister.

4. Not to be confused with his nephew and successor.

John Knox was about thirteen years old. The martyr was not very old himself, only twenty-four when he died. His last words were, "How long, O Lord, shall darkness cover this realm! How long wilt thou suffer this tyranny of men! Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"<sup>5</sup>

A martyr of noble birth created even more interest in the new doctrines. The novel opinions continued to spread, and the officials, alarmed, adopted a policy of vigorous persecution. In the decade between 1530 and 1540, many able and honest men gave their lives for confessing the truth. Numerous others fled to the Continent, few of them ever returning. During this time, it does not appear that there was a single public teacher of the truth in Scotland. The Word spread rapidly anyway, largely due to the importation of Tyndale's translation of the Scriptures along with many Protestant books.

The authorities resisted this new knowledge with a stiff, bloodthirsty, and unyielding blindness. Bishop Crichton of Dunkeld is reported by Foxe as saying that he thanked God that he "never knew what the Old and New Testaments were." Even though the incident is apocryphal, the fact that the expression subsequently became proverbial in Scotland indicated how widespread such clerical ignorance was. Though deplorably ignorant of the Bible, the ecclesiastical officials nonetheless clearly understood the threat presented by the new Protestant

5. Thomas McCrie, *Life of John Knox*, 14.



doctrines. In response to that threat, the authorities were quite prepared to use as much force as they thought it might take to suppress them.

As events turned out, it took more than they had. The pressures building toward reformation were enormous. Another important force preparing for the Reformation was, surprisingly, the work of poets and playwrights. A corrupt clergy is always good for a few laughs. Those with the power to persecute were forced to tolerate ridicule of this form in a way they did not tolerate midnight Bible readings. Her own corruption and the widespread mockery of that corruption greatly diminished the moral authority of the Church. The bishops repeatedly sought laws against lampooning, but the mockery was impossible to stop. Just imagine today a law forbidding any jokes at the expense of televangelists.

By 1540, a reforming zeal was widespread among a multitude of commoners and a significant number of the Scottish nobility. As the later history of Scotland shows, some of the nobility were motivated by a hunger for church lands, and it has been easy for some to dismiss the Reformation because of this obvious greed factor. It is true that the Reformation was manipulated, later, by some, but at this early date an acceptance of the gospel was much more likely to end in fire or exile than in rich, landed estates. The Reformation in Scotland was born and nourished through a hunger for truth.

## CHAPTER 2: EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

Details about John Knox's early life are few, and some are contradictory. Early biographers believed he was born around 1505, but the consensus now is that he was born c. 1515,<sup>7</sup> probably at Haddington.

Though he obviously received a liberal education, where he was educated is also uncertain. Theodore Beza, a contemporary of Knox, says that he studied under John Major at the University of St. Andrews, but there is no record of him having matriculated in the defective records of St. Andrews. A certain John Knox entered the University of Glasgow in 1522, but for various reasons,

7. Kevin Reed, "John Knox: The Forgotten Reformer" on *Library of Presbyterian Heritage Publications* (Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1999), PDF file on CD, 25.

this is not likely to be our Knox. All in all, Knox probably studied at St. Andrews.

If he studied under John Major, he studied under one of the great scholastic minds of the time. Major was a very capable exponent of a particular view of church government which denied supremacy to the papacy, and John Knox's peer George Buchanan, who also studied under Major, learned some of these early lessons very well.<sup>8</sup> But Knox soon began to reject the convoluted scholasticism which dominated academic circles at that time, and turned his attention *ad fontes*, back to the original sources of Scripture and the early fathers. Although better than many of his time, Major was also capable of scholastic gnat-strangling, and Knox soon turned away from this teaching.

Far from being a rejection of Church tradition, the Reformation was a self-conscious return to earlier traditions—the teachings of the New Testament and the early Church fathers. One historical observer makes this very important point:

8. This was the view that defended the decrees of the Council of Constance, and the liberties of the Gallican church, over against the papacy. One of the most common modern errors about the medieval period is the assumption that papal claims were unquestioned and unchallenged. But Major, who was no Protestant, staunchly opposed the claims of the papacy. In this, he had much in common with many medieval thinkers.

New reforms were initiated in the leading cities of the Reformation which reflected the conviction that pure worship must be “according to the Scripture,” and consequently simple, spiritual, and intelligent. Intensive study of Scripture *and Patristic* sources over the next two decades, as well as regular interaction among the leading reformers resulted in a more thorough reform.<sup>9</sup>

This impulse to return to the ways of the ancient Church was strong in Knox. He was not content with the excerpts of the fathers contained in medieval anthologies, so he sought out the original works, in particular the writings of Jerome and Augustine. As McCrie points out, in Jerome he found a method of study which greatly attracted him—returning to the Scriptures as the source of all truth, and an emphasis on studying them in the original languages. From reading Augustine, Knox quickly learned how a man may be greatly honored in name while studiously ignored in substance. These profound intellectual influences were beginning to accumulate in Knox before he broke with the Roman Catholic church. He was a reformation waiting to happen.

He began working as a papal cleric around 1540. Just a few years later, in 1543, he gave up this position. Some time prior to 1540, Knox had been ordained as a Roman

9. Terry Johnson, ed., *Leading in Worship* (Oak Ridge, TN: The Covenant Foundation, 1996), 121. The emphasis is mine.

### CHAPTER 3: WISHART'S BODYGUARD

George Wishart had been teaching the Greek New Testament in Montrose, and suspicion of heresy soon fell on him. The bishop of Brechin summoned Wishart, who withdrew instead to England. He resided for about six years at the University of Cambridge before returning to Scotland in 1544 and beginning an itinerant preaching ministry. He returned to a tempestuous situation but was not of a tumultuous spirit himself.

We have two accounts of Wishart's character, one from John Knox, and the other from a student of Wishart's at Cambridge named Emery Tylney. According to Tylney, Wishart was "courteous, lowly, lovely, glad to teach, desirous to learn." Knox paints a similar portrait: "a man of such graces as befor him war never had within this realm, yea, and ar rare to be found yit in any man,

nochtwithstanding this great lyght of God that sence his dayis hes schyned unto us.”<sup>11</sup>

Scotland was in turmoil for a number of reasons, political and religious together. After the death of James V, the nation divided into two factions. One party aligned with France, and the other party favored England. The established Church was a strong advocate of the French alliance, with the Protestants sympathetic to Protestant England. At the same time, the position of the Protestants was tenuous because England was in truth Scotland’s historical adversary, and the ambitions of England’s king, Henry VIII, made the situation even more complicated. It would probably not have taken a lot to convince Henry to ascend the throne of Scotland, had it been offered. The pride of England made even some of the Protestants nervous. There is good reason to believe that Knox was in this number.

There were wheels within wheels. The Earl of Arran recanted his Protestantism in part because he was alarmed at an argument presented to him by his illegitimate brother, John Hamilton. “He alarmed Arran by reminding him that the legality of his mother’s marriage, and therefore his own legitimacy, depended on the validity of the divorce granted by the Pope to his father from a former wife. If the papal authority . . . were repudiated

11. Both quoted in P. Hume Brown, *John Knox: A Biography* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1895), 54–5.

by Scotland, then the Regent was a bastard with no legal claim either to the earldom, to the regency, or . . . to the throne."<sup>12</sup> All this serves to show how tangled the religious, personal, and political questions were—possible to distinguish, but impossible to separate.

So when George Wishart returned to Scotland, the party favoring France was in power, but certain powerful lords of the English faction afforded him some measure of protection. One of those lords was Hugh Douglas, protector of John Knox and father of the boys whom Knox was tutoring. During a five-week stay in Lothian, Wishart stayed at the house of Douglas. Knox had many opportunities to hear him preach and to confer with him privately.

Whenever Wishart was preaching in his area of the country, Knox accompanied and heard him gladly. During a visit to Dundee, Knox described a very serious situation with the dry humor of Scots understatement.

While he was spending his life to comfort the afflicted, the Devil ceased not to stir up his own son the Cardinal again, who corrupted by money a desperate priest named sir John Wigton, to slay the said master George, who looked not to himself in all things so circumspectly as worldly men would have wished.<sup>13</sup>

12. Henry Cowan, *John Knox*, 54–5.

13. John Knox, *History of the Reformation in Scotland*, vol. 1, ed. William Croft Dickinson (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950), 63–4.

Knox went on to recount how this priest approached Wishart with a short sword under his gown. Wishart saw him and said, "My friend, what would ye do?" and put his hand on the priest's hand and took his dagger from him. The priest confessed what he was about to do, and the surrounding crowd grew violent, and demanded the traitor to be delivered over to them. But Wishart took the aspiring assassin in his arms and said, "Whosoever troubles him shall trouble me; for he has hurt me in nothing, but he has done great comfort both to you and me, to wit, he has let us understand what we may fear in times to come. We will watch better." And so he saved the life of the one who was going to take his.

The resolution to "watch better" was also remembered. After the assassination attempt at Dundee, a body-guard was assigned to protect Wishart. In the accounts, we see that role falling to Knox, who carried a two-handed broadsword to protect the evangelist. On the night he was captured, Wishart directed that this sword be taken away from Knox. The latter asked permission to accompany him to his next destination, which Wishart denied. By this time, Wishart was under a very strong burden, a heavy presentiment of his approaching martyrdom. He



told Knox, “Nay, return to your bairnes, and God bless you: ane is sufficient for a sacrifice.”<sup>14</sup>

The earl of Bothwell betrayed Wishart, and he was delivered into the hands of the cardinal, then given a mock trial, in which he was insulted and spat upon by his judges. Wishart was condemned to the stake as an obstinate heretic. He was scheduled to be executed near the Castle of St. Andrews, with all the guns of the castle trained on the place to prevent any attempted rescue from any quarter. The front tower of the palace was decked out with cushions so that the cardinal and his clergy could enjoy the show.

Wishart gave his last testimony as the fire was lit. “This flame hath scorched my body, yet hath it not daunted my spirit. But he who from yonder high place beholdest us with such pride, shall, within a few days, lie in the same as ignominiously as now he is seen proudly to rest himself.”<sup>15</sup> The fire was started, Wishart was mercifully strangled, and the flames consumed his body, but this remarkable prophecy at the close of his life came to an astonishing fulfillment, and was closely connected to John Knox’s call to the ministry.

14. Thomas McCrie, *Life of John Knox*, 21. This is as good a time as any to apologize for the variations of spelling and usage. Different sources modernize the language and spelling in different ways and to differing extent. *Bairnes*, meaning “children,” refers to Knox’s pupils, and *ane* means “one.”

15. Thomas McCrie, *The Story of the Scottish Church* (1874; reprint, Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1988), 20-1.



## CHAPTER 4: THE ASSASSINATION

Just several months after Wishart's execution, the Castle at St. Andrews was captured by a band of Protestant conspirators. One of the chief conspirators was a man named John Leslie, who had vowed to avenge the death of Wishart. A report of trouble had come to the cardinal's ears, but he thought himself completely secure in his castle.

The conspirators approached the castle early on a Saturday morning. The prior evening, the cardinal "had been busy at his accounts with Mistress Marion Ogilvy that night," as Knox put it.<sup>16</sup> About sixteen men surprised the porter and forced their way into the castle. The cardinal, awakened by the shouting, asked from the window what the noise meant. The reply came that the

16. John Knox, *History of the Reformation in Scotland*, vol. 1, 76.

castle had been taken, and so the cardinal locked himself in his chamber, piled the furniture against the door, and armed himself with a two-handed sword.

John Leslie came to the door and demanded to be let in. The cardinal refused and fire was brought, and either the cardinal or his chamber boy opened the door. The cardinal cried out, "I am a priest; I am a priest; ye will not slay me." John Leslie struck him, as did another conspirator; but a third man, James Melville, perceiving them to be "in a choler," that is, in a temper, pulled them back. He said, "This work and judgment of God (although it be secret) ought to be done with greater gravity."

Melville then presented the cardinal with the point of the sword, and demanded,

Repent thee of thy former wicked life, but especially of shedding the blood of that notable instrument of God, Master George Wishart, which albeit the flame of fire consumed before men, yet cries it a vengeance upon thee, and we from God are sent to revenge it: For here, before my God, I protest, that neither the hetterent [hatred] of thy person, the love of thy riches, nor the fear of any trouble thou could have to me in particular, moved, nor moves me to strike thee; but only because thou hast been, and remain an obstinate enemy against Christ Jesus and his holy Evangel.<sup>17</sup>

17. *History*, 77-8.

Then, as Knox relates the story, Melville struck the cardinal two or three times. The cardinal cried out, "I am a priest; I am a priest; fye, fye: all is gone."<sup>18</sup>

A commotion arose in the town and people gathered outside the wall. They were told to disperse because the cardinal was dead, but the people said they would not go unless they saw him. So, the body of the cardinal was brought to the wall, and he was shown dead over the wall—and the words of the martyr Wishart came to a very unusual fulfillment.

While Knox was not involved in this conspiracy against the cardinal's life, there is no question but that he heartily approved of it. After his description of the death of the cardinal, he stops to give an important warning:

These things we write merrily. But we would that the Reader should observe God's just judgments, and how that he can deprehend the worldly wise in their own wisdom, make their table to be a snare to trap their own feet, and their own presupposed strength to be their own destruction. These are the works of our God, whereby he would admonish the tyrants of this earth, that in the end he will be revenged of their cruelty, what strength so ever they make in the contrary.<sup>19</sup>

18. *Ibid.*, 78.

19. *Ibid.*, 79.

This approach is honestly problematic for many modern Christians. Commenting on Knox's "boisterous and ferocious" sense of humor, C.S. Lewis says this of Knox's comment that he was writing "merrily": "He was apparently afraid lest the fun of the thing might lead us to forget that even an assassination may have its serious side."<sup>20</sup> The whole incident seems surreal to us.

On this question, Knox was certainly able to defend himself ably with an appeal to biblical precedent—the example of Ehud comes to mind—but the problem still nags at us. Too often, at this point, even men who appreciate Knox will back away. They will say, for example, that Knox was essentially a man of his time.<sup>21</sup> This is quite true, but also beside the point. Was it right or wrong according to the only final standard that Knox would accept, which is to say the Word of God? However, even here the problem seems to us to be even worse. How can we even think about justifying the shedding of blood in the name of the Bible?

Beneath our difficulty with this situation, we should not be surprised to find a tangled raft of contemporary assumptions. For a good example of this, contrast our problem with our response to the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A valiant German pastor, he distinguished

20. C.S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, 201.

21. John Woodbridge, ed., *Great Leaders of the Christian Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 252.

himself in his opposition to Hitler, and early in the war became a conspirator against the Third Reich. He worked as a courier for a group that made an attempt on Hitler's life in 1944. His connection with the plot was discovered, and he was executed in 1945.<sup>22</sup>

Although Bonhoeffer faced stiff opposition in his own time, in his own nation, in the aftermath of the war, Christians have almost universally applauded him for his role in the assassination attempt. Faith without works is dead.

This does not trouble us because we all know how evil Hitler was. Therefore, this necessarily means that our problem is not with assassination *per se*. Rather our problem is more to do with the standard used to make the determination to commit it. Somewhere C.S. Lewis makes a comment relevant to this discussion when he says that we moderns like to take credit for not burning witches, but the reason we do not burn them, he argues, is that we do not believe in them. We *do* execute traitors, Lewis observed, because we all recognize the damage a traitor can do.

We all understand how evil Hitler was, so we admire Bonhoeffer, but well-trained by the assumptions of modernity, we do not understand the context of the Reformation, and the nature of the conflict whenever it came to blood. "Usually brutal arrogance in the judge

22. *Ibid.*, 351.

confronts brutal courage in the prisoner.”<sup>23</sup> We believe all religious disputes are in the last analysis debates over nothing, and because we have forgotten the history of our culture, we are unaware of how massive the machinery of oppression was in Knox’s day. Thus Knox’s approval of this event is seen as that of a religious fanatic and not as that of a freedom fighter.

The wickedness of this particular cardinal was notorious. He was not simply corrupt, but bloodthirsty as well. To take just one example of his character, once while traveling, he instigated the governor to hang four honest men for eating a goose on Friday. He even had a young woman drowned, because she refused to pray the “Our Lady” during the birth of her child. Knox reported that the woman, “having a souchking babe upon hir briest, was drounit.”<sup>24</sup>

One final thought is perhaps worth considering. Because Knox was a man of his times he did share certain blind spots and assumptions with his contemporaries, but he also had a much better view of the evil he was fighting than we do. Five hundred years from now, we should not be surprised if some Christians have a problem with Bonhoeffer as well for trying to kill someone over a mere “political” difference.

23. C.S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, 202.

24. Thomas McCrie, *Life of John Knox*, 22.