RESIST TYRANTS, OBEY GOD

Lessons Learned from the Life and Times of John Knox

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Published by
Founders Press

P.O. Box 150931 • Cape Coral, FL 33915
Phone (888) 525–1689

Electronic Mail: officeadmin@founders.org

Website: www.founders.org

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-0-9849498-7-8 (Paperback)
ISBN: 978-0-9849498-8-5 (eBook)
ISBN: 978-1-965810-12-5 (Audiobook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024949934

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Foreword

In our God, there is strength to resist and confound multitudes if we unfeignedly depend on Him.

—John Knox

You hold in your hands a very dangerous book. Jacob Tanner's *Resist Tyrants, Obey God: Lessons from the Life and Times of John Knox* will challenge you to commit the cardinal sin of our post-Christian age: to live as if you actually believe that Christ reigns supreme over all of life. At a time when the only form of Christian faith that is (barely) tolerated is a private piety that never intrudes upon the public square, Jacob Tanner's retrieval of the teaching of John Knox acts as a well-timed brick thrown through the window of winsome third-wayism. If you are looking for yet another book that tells Christians to stay on the sidelines or head for the hills, you will not find it here. This book runs contrary to the counterfeit gospel of "thou shall be viewed as respectable by your cultural betters," challenging Christians to live as if they truly fear God and not man.

It is said that at John Knox's funeral, the Earl of Morton delivered the epitaph, "Here lies he who never feared the face of man." Jacob Tanner's well-researched work illuminates a life characterized by fearlessness toward men (and women) arising out of fear and love of the triune God of Scripture. Knox's life is presented in a way that is fair and balanced. Tanner acknowledges that the Scottish Reformer sometimes delivered fundamentally correct words in the wrong way or at the wrong time. At the same time, this book never apologizes for those aspects of Knox's theology that cohere with Scripture but have been deemed as unseemly by the wisdom of this age. *Resist Tyrants, Obey God* is neither a hagiography nor an apology—rather, it

presents and evaluates Knox's own words with the presupposition that Scripture is the supreme standard by which all human opinions and controversies must be tried.

Those unfamiliar with Knox will find the biographical section of this book helpful in establishing the context for Knox's ministry. Knox's early experiences, including his time as a galley slave, shaped his understanding of the sovereignty of God, his belief in the power of the gospel for individual salvation and societal change, and his commitment to God's Word over earthly authorities. These convictions were planted through his interactions with early influences, including Patrick Hamilton and George Wishart, and refined through his engagement with other Reformers such as John Calvin and Henry Bullinger. These biographical details are essential to fully understanding the most famous chapter in Knox's life: his confrontation with Mary Queen of Scots. In tracing the major events in Knox's life, Jacob Tanner takes great pains to present a balanced picture of John Knox's personality and ministry, showing that the Reformer possessed not just a prophet's voice but also a pastor's heart.

Jacob Tanner's greatest contribution is his clear and convincing argument for the continued relevance of John Knox's teachings for Christians today. Just as in Knox's day, our society needs the influence of courageous Christians who, grounded in biblical truth and submitted to the lordship of Christ, wield the power of the gospel to transform lives and societies. The life and teaching of John Knox challenges us to live out our faith boldly, behaving as if we actually believe those truths we claim to believe. Jacob Tanner's timely and relevant retrieval of John Knox informs and inspires us to stand for truth even in the face of opposition, trusting that, in our God, there is strength to resist and confound multitudes if we unfeignedly depend on Him.

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Introduction

This is a cheerful world as I see it from my fair garden, under the shadow of my vines. But if I could ascend some high mountain, and look out over the wide lands, you know very well what I should see: brigands on the highways, pirates on the seas, armies fighting, cities burning, in the amphitheaters men murdered to please applauding crowds, selfishness and cruelty and misery and despair under all roofs. It is a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They have found a joy which is a thousand times better than any of the pleasures of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are the Christians—and I am one of them.

—Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, AD 258

What does it mean to have overcome the world, to be despised and persecuted, yet to care not? What does it mean to know it is a "bad world" but to hold to the great hope that the Lord is even now reigning, redeeming, and renewing His creation? What is it to know joy, courage, and boldness in Christ, even in the face of great wickedness and evil? At the most foundational level, what does it mean to be one of the Christians?

Many men and women stand as exemplary stalwarts of the Christian faith. But journey to Scotland in the sixteenth century, during that tumultuous period of the Protestant Reformation,

and you will discover a Christian who, by God's grace, embodied the ferocious tenacity of an overcomer of the world. Here you will discover a man who possessed Christlike boldness, courage, and joy—qualities that are lacking, yet are so desperately needed in Christians presently. However, many who would journey to his homeland today would be surprised to find his burial site quite different and less extravagant than such a remarkable life would typically receive.

Beginning at the End

The shadow of St. Giles' Cathedral looms large over a paved-over parking lot in Edinburgh, Scotland. As is typical with most parking lots, a few cars can be found parked on any given day. But should you happen upon parking spot number 23, and should you find no car inhabiting the spot, then you may just find an unexpected memorial plaque engraved in the pavement:

> The above stone marks the approximate site of the burial in St Giles Graveyard of John Knox the great Scottish Divine who died 24 Nov 1572.

John Knox, arguably one of the most important Scotsman in history, and certainly one of the most important of the sixteenth-century Reformers, lies buried beneath a parking lot. Where one would typically expect to discover a large grave marker or grand monument of stone, one finds concrete paved over a burial site instead. Where one would expect manicured grass and even carefully arrayed flowers, parked cars are discovered.

Somehow, this seems to be the sort of thing Knox would not have minded. Perhaps he would have even welcomed such an unremarkable, and even unrespectable, grave. Though he longed to be buried near his beloved St. Giles, his heart's most urgent longing was to glorify God. That his burial site was paved over, while his transformative legacy lives on for God's glory, seems befitting a man as wonderfully used by the Lord as John Knox.

Yes, Knox was an overcomer of the world through Christ. He was defiant of all human authorities who would stand in the way of his serving and glorifying the Lord. Though he would have much preferred a life of peace and tranquility, he knew he had been called to a holy war in which the very gospel itself was at stake. Often threatened, once enslaved, facing violence on nearly every side, and always persecuted, his courage to do the work of the Lord never wavered. His joy in Christ never diminished.

Knox was one of the Christians—and there is much that we can learn from him today.

Framing the Portrait

How does one begin to learn from the saints of the past? By first beginning to understand their lives and the times in which they lived. When we begin to understand who they were, how they were shaped by their times, and the various ways in which they acted for the sake of the gospel, we can begin to view them as God intended: flawed men and women used greatly by the Lord, upon whose shoulders we now stand. As the writer of Hebrews wrote:

> Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:1)

As we walk the corridors and halls of what many have called "The Faith Hall of Fame," we will discover that the history of the church is replete with heroic figures who, though timid and small on their own, were used mightily in the hands of the omnipotent God of the universe. They stand as beacons of light, like lighthouses in the dark of night, leading us out from the tumultuous waves of the seas of this world and to the safe harbors and shores

of the kingdom of God. They are *not* our saviors, nor are they the *true* heroes, but they point us to Jesus, the one who is.

Knox is one of these lighthouses. Of course, to learn from the life of Knox necessitates that we spend some time acclimating ourselves with his history. After all, ours is an age of political correctness, cancel culture, and limited speech. For these reasons and more, it can only be assumed that many younger Christians know very little about the great Scottish Reformer, and those who know of him may have limited, or even skewed and negative, perceptions of him. After all, this was a man who defied a queen—and if there's one thing a man must not do in the secularist twenty-first-century West, it is to defy a woman.

Knox was also a strong preacher. Some wrote that even as he neared death, his preaching was so powerfully immense that it was like thunder cracking the sky. Some imagined that the pulpit from which he preached would even one day explode from the fiery blows he delivered to it when he would slam his fist down upon it. And if there's one thing Western secularism doesn't want, it is strong preachers who know what they believe, understand why they believe it, and urgently desire to teach these truths to others.

Perhaps most damning of all to Knox's legacy is the fact that he was a Christian pastor heavily involved in politics. Not only did he defy queens and their bloody regimes, but he also heavily influenced popular opinion and law with the Scriptures. And if there's one sin that secularism finds totally unforgivable, it is an unremitting belief in the Holy Scriptures and a relentless insistence that Christians must develop a biblical worldview wherein Christ reigns as the supreme Lord over every sphere of life and thought.

Yet these three things—his courageous and open defiance of tyrants, his obedience to God, and his unwavering commitment to Scripture and the lordship of Christ—make him one of the most important historical figures for modern Christians to study and learn from, even if they find occasional points of disagreement with his theology, speech, or actions.

All this may seem foreign to some readers. Can we really learn so much from a man who lived and died nearly five centuries ago? Can we really learn from a man who was, and continues to be, so terribly polarizing?

Knox may not have a lot of admirers today, especially outside of our churches. All this is to be expected, though. Knox was not very well liked by his political and religious enemies in his own day either, although he was sometimes feared by them, especially for his bold prayers. It cannot be thought surprising that the secular elite, who have shed all pretense of religion, would like him even less today. This was a man who believed in the sovereign rule and reign of King Jesus and believed that His sovereign reign would extend over his own nation of Scotland, and all other nations too. Knox believed that kings, queens, princes, princesses, priests, pastors, teachers, farmers, warriors—and everyone in between—were all subject to Christ as Lord and would one day bow the knee before Him, one way or another.

Arguably, it was the sovereign lordship of Christ that motivated the life and ministry of John Knox. Imagine, dear reader, what would happen if the Lord raised up a thunderous multitude of Christians today who were motivated and driven by the same truths that Knox was!

Learning Obedience from the Resistant

Yes, Knox was considered dangerous in his own day, and he is found to be even more dangerous today. He famously declared, "Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God." This is not without scriptural warrant and precedence. In fact, it is completely in accordance with Acts 5:29: "We must obey God rather than men." Surely the last thing Caesar wants to hear is that there is a greater authority than his own, to which even he must answer. Yet that is precisely what Knox taught and insisted upon—the lordship of Jesus Christ is the inescapable rule under which all men must live.

Knox's insistent teaching that one must obey God and defy tyranny, in whatever form it may take, has given rise to a new

phrase today: "Obey God; defy tyrants." This is not some seemingly cool slogan with no purpose, or an empty motto from his life. It is the heartbeat of the worldview of the Christian who is living in a "bad world," but truly believes Christ is reigning until all things are placed beneath His feet. Knox's fruitful life lived in service to Christ was borne from belief in the words of Psalm 110:1: "The LORD says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'"

Knox believed that the Bible was God's inspired Word. As God's Word, Knox believed the Bible was true. Do you?

Knox believed that Jesus Christ is the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God, the Savior of sinners, the Intercessor of the saints, and the reigning, conquering God-King of the cosmos. Do you?

Knox believed that the authority of Christ and His Word transforms the way people live and, ultimately, changes the world. Do you?

Knox believed that the sovereign rule and reign of Christ, expressed through His Word and gospel, is the compelling force by which sinners are saved to profess Jesus as Lord, biblical communities may be built, and genuine Christian culture may be established. Do you?

Whether or not you already believe these things, or if you desire to cultivate greater knowledge and application in these areas, Knox can help us today.

Other biographies have been written on Knox, and I commend many of them to you. This work, however, is not meant to be merely another biography, though we will certainly spend a few chapters discussing biographical information.

The focus and emphasis of this work is to retrieve the thought of Knox for modern Christians. It is a project that one may call historical theology; that is to say, the primary goal of this work is to learn who Knox was as a Christian, what he thought, what

he taught, and what he did—and to see what modern Christians might draw and learn from him. This means that most of our sources will come primarily from the pen of Knox himself. As often as possible, we will seek to allow Knox to speak for himself.

This is not a book about hero worship, although one could certainly do a lot worse than to look to Knox as a hero. This book is about a flawed Christian who was saved by the grace of God the Father through faith in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ the Son, and who was filled with God the Holy Spirit to live, serve, and die during the sixteenth century. While Knox was not perfect, are not imperfect vessels used to the greatest effect in the hands of the sovereign God of the universe?

Some may say that Knox was careless in some of his statements and actions, but perhaps it would do the church some good today to see more Christians serving God courageously and faithfully, as Knox did, rather than placing so much attention and emphasis on being careful to please the world. This work is not advocating for careless Christians, but it is advocating for courageously faithful Christians in the same vein as John Knox.

Another caveat of this work is that Knox is often considered one of the fathers of Presbyterianism, but I (the author) am distinctly and confessionally Baptist. It may be said that both camps come with their own theological baggage, and sometimes they seem totally incompatible with one another. It has even been said by some that Knox's involvement in government and state affairs, his defiance of tyranny and political activism, and his establishment of church over state are totally incompatible with Baptist theology. My goal with this work is to cut through the red tape, empty the theological baggage on the ground, and begin to sort through what the Bible actually teaches and commands—with the help of Knox. As it turns out, all Christians, regardless of theological persuasions, have much they can learn from the man.

I believe we need a modern reformation and genuine revival today. It's going to take a few Knoxes to see this happen—but God, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, can cultivate

reformation, work revival, and raise up modern John Knoxes. My prayer is that this work will be not only an encouragement and challenge to Christians, but also a tool and weapon in the hands of our sovereign God and Lord to accomplish His perfect purposes.

Knox famously prayed, “Give me Scotland, or I die!” Let us join him in courageously and faithfully praying: *Lord, give us our lands for the sake of Your gospel, or we perish!*

“Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). Amen.

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Unlikely Origins
Knox's Upbringing

[I am] uncertain as yet, what God shall further work in this country, except that I see the battle shall be great, for Satan rageth even to the uttermost; and I am come (I praise my God,) even in the brunt of the battle.[1]

—John Knox, in a letter to Mrs. Anna Locke

To understand John Knox, one must understand the medieval era that shaped the time into which he was born. The trouble is that the medieval era is, perhaps, one of the most misunderstood eras in the history of the world. It encompasses a wide expanse of the centuries, sometimes thought to have lasted from the sixth century through the sixteenth century. Commonly, this almost one-thousand-year-long period has been represented by another title: the "Dark Ages"—a time when, secular historians often argue, mankind stopped his march of progress, turned barbaric in his dealings, and tossed all hopes of artistry and scientific achievement aside.

The reality, though, is much more nuanced than a simple title would have you believe. The Dark Ages weren't all dark;

1 John Knox, *Letters, Chiefly Relating to the Progress of the Reformation in Scotland*, vol. 6 of *The Works of John Knox* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2014), 21. Language has been lightly updated by the author to modern English spellings.

there were, of course, achievements and advancements made in philosophy and theology. Great stories were told, legends were made, and cultures were built. Yet there was indeed *darkness* over the world at the time, especially of the spiritual variety. While there were certainly Christians who faithfully lived and died for Christ, there was a general confusing and conflating of the gospel during this period. Rather than looking to Jesus Christ alone as the author and finisher of man's faith, the seemingly monolithic Roman Catholic Church had, through a series of councils and popes, come to teach that man's salvation rests partially in Christ and partially in man himself.

The result of such teaching was no less than the darkening of the gospel, and thus the darkening of the church itself. This is one reason why one of the most famous mottos to come out of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century was "post tenebras lux" (after darkness, light). Spiritual darkness had cast a dimming shadow over the light of the gospel, but the rediscovery of the gospel by men such as Martin Luther and John Calvin had unleashed the light once more. The long night had passed, and while there were moon and stars to shine during that time, the dawning of the gospel brought a new sun that lit a fire upon this earth.

After all, Jesus had promised, "I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). This was not, as a long line of popes had suggested, a promise of continued apostolic succession beginning with Peter as the "vicar of Christ on earth," but, as the true Spirit-filled Christians of the day knew, a promise that Jesus would build His church on the testimony of the gospel. In fact, the true Spirit-filled Christians knew that this was no less than a promise of victory; Jesus would build His church through the spread of the gospel, and through the spread of the gospel, even the gates of hell themselves would fall.

But alongside the shadow cast across the gospel, the long medieval era was also marred by sin and decadence across much of Europe. Luther's Germany, Calvin's France (and later Switzerland), and Latimer's England were all plagued by this spiritual darkness.

This was, of course, no less true in Scotland where, despite the influence of Roman Catholicism, savagery reigned supreme. Sin ran rampant and unchecked. Wars and rumors of wars flooded the lands, and plagues chipped away at the population. Roman Catholicism offered decadence to the wealthy and royalty but little in the way of hope to the common man. Those who dared to stand against the theological tide were marked as enemies of Rome.

At the turn of the sixteenth century, Scotland also saw one of the most devastating defeats in the history of the nation. For the better part of two centuries, Scotland had found itself in periods of intermittent war with England. In 1502, Scotland signed the Treaty of Perpetual Peace with England to try to bring an end to the battles, but the treaty was anything but perpetual. By 1513, the two nations found themselves clashing once more. In a battle that included the ambitions of the French, the Italians, the papacy, and the Spaniards, along with the English and Scots, more than ten thousand Scots were killed, including their king.

The Treaty of Perpetual Peace was effectively broken when King James IV of Scotland chose to side with the French, who had been engaged in conflict with the English over territory. This he did in accordance with an even older treaty, the Auld Alliance, which was an alliance between France and Scotland created in 1295 to fight together against England. However, this decision earned the ire of Pope Leo X and English Cardinal Christopher Bainbridge, who saw James IV's siding with the French as the breaking of the Treaty of Perpetual Peace. Pope Leo X excommunicated James IV, and the Scots resisted at the Battle of Flodden on September 9, 1513. However, in a chilvalrous move,[2] James IV first sent notice to the English that he planned to invade them, almost a whole month in advance.

The battle was a disaster. James IV led an army of Scots thirty thousand strong and managed to take Norham Castle from the

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2 The code of chivalry was akin to a medieval code of honor that taught knights and royalty how to live, fight, and die with piety, honor, and magnanimity.

English in August, but his alerting the English of his intentions permitted them the necessary time to gather forces to defend themselves. By the morning of September 10, 1513, everything changed. One historian described the devastation in this way:

> When dawn broke on the morning of 10 September 1513, the landscape of hell was revealed. On the gently undulating northern ridges of Branxton Hill, more than 10,000 men lay dead or dying. In the midst of the carnage were the naked, plundered bodies of King James, his natural half-brother, Alexander Stewart, who was Archbishop of St Andrews, George Hepburn, who was Bishop of the Isles, two abbots, nine great earls of Scotland, fourteen lords of parliament, innumerable knights and noblemen of lesser degree and thousands of ploughmen, farmers, weavers and burgesses. It was the appalling aftermath of the battle of Flodden, the greatest military disaster in Scotland's history.[3]

Back at home, King James IV's wife, Queen Margaret Tudor, awaited news of her husband with their infant son, James V. By October 21, 1513, James V was named king of Scotland at only seventeen months old, though he would not personally begin to rule until 1528. To help rule and reign until he was of proper age, regents were set in place, such as his mother and later his cousin, Duke John of Albany. This left Scotland without a proper ruler and king for a number of years.

Eventually, the teenaged James V would find himself under the tutelage and care of his stepfather, Archibald Douglas, Sixth Earl of Angus. After a series of foiled escape attempts, James V would successfully flee from Douglas and find his mother, who had been secretly trying to divorce the Earl of Angus and marry her new lover, Henry Stewart. (As stated earlier, this was a time of savagery and decadence, and much of it centered around the love affairs of the nobles and royalty.) Once away from the earl, James V

3 Alistair Moffat, *Scotland: A History from Earliest Times* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Birlinn Limited, 2015), loc. 3822 of 12933, Kindle.

executed his revenge by enacting the equivalent of a modern-day restraining order, forbidding the earl and the rest of the Douglas clan from coming within seven miles of himself.

It was a confusing and turbulent time in Scotland, with many battles being fought across the realm, both physical and political. But this was also the backdrop of John Knox's birth in Scotland; and it was, by the Lord's decree, a field ripe and ready for the harvest, simply awaiting the laborer who was soon to enter the labor of the Lord. As Esther was once told by her cousin Mordecai, Knox was born "for such a time as this" (Esther 4:14).

Of Unknown Time and Place

If 1513 is famous in the history of Scotland because of the devastating results of the Battle of Flodden, then 1517 is a year that is infamous the world over, for that was the year that the Protestant Reformation began in earnest. On October 31 of that year, Martin Luther famously nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Within this short treatise, Luther argued against the Roman Catholic Church's practice of indulgences—a practice that had duped many gullible men and women into first believing that there existed such a place as purgatory (an intermediate state between earth and heaven wherein the saved would go to be further purged of their sins by fire before being allowed entrance into God's holy presence), and then believing that they could theoretically buy tickets to heaven by giving money to the church. Luther rightly saw this as a corrupt and abominable practice that turned the house of God into a den of thieves. Luther incorrectly thought that the pope would agree with him. Little did he know how far down—or up—the corruption and rot had actually spread within Roman Catholicism.

John Knox was probably born about a year or so after the death of King James IV and would have been about three years old when Luther was hammering the nails to the church's door in Wittenberg. The boy would have been far too young to really know much of what was happening in the world at large, as Scotland found

itself with a child king and the Reformation really began to find its legs, but he was also born into a world wherein he would never know anything other than reformation and rebellion and conflict. In fact, almost his whole life was lived during the major years of the Protestant Reformation. Yet who could have imagined that the infant Knox, probably just a bit younger than Scotland's new King James V and only just learning to talk in complete sentences on the day Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses, would become one of the most influential leaders of that very same Protestant movement?

As amazingly utilized by God as he would be in his later life, the truth is that Knox's actual year of birth is unknown. His town of origin is, likewise, shrouded in darkness. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is even confusion surrounding where exactly he was educated, as we will see in the next chapter.

While it is generally thought by historians today that Knox was probably born in 1514 or 1515, there are conflicting dates. Some, like the nineteenth-century historian David Laing, originally recorded that Knox was born in 1505.[4] How does the date of a man's birth, whose life bears the magnitude and weight of the magisterial John Knox, become so obscured as to include a margin of error of a full decade? It was a different time, and while Knox painstakingly recorded a great deal of information about the history of the Reformation in Scotland, he did not record history about himself with that same meticulous detail. Whatever the case—whether Knox was three or thirteen when Luther wrote his Ninety-Five Theses—the truth remains that almost all of Knox's life was consumed by the Reformation.

The obscure details related to his early years make pinpointing his actual birthplace rather difficult too. It is likely that Knox was born either in the village of Gifford in East Lothian or on a street called Giffordgate in the town of Haddington, also part of East Lothian. It is likely that some of this confusion over his town of

4 David Laing, ed., *The Works of John Knox* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2014), 1:xiii.

origin exists due to the similarities between the name of the town and the road, which are about four miles apart from one another. Regardless, the latter appears to be favored by most historians today, while earlier historians favored the former. The latter appears to have the most evidence, however. In both instances, he would have been born about twenty to twenty-five miles to the east of Edinburgh, Scotland, and about a thousand miles from Luther's Wittenberg.

Just a Small-Town Scottish Boy

Before we can consider the impact of Luther's actions in Germany upon the Scots, we first need to understand what life was like for the Scots in the sixteenth century. What would life have been like in those days for a boy from Haddington, Scotland?

Like many European territories, Scotland had suffered immensely during the Black Plague. While the fourteenth century saw the Scottish population numbering almost a million strong, by the turn of the sixteenth century, it is estimated that there were likely fewer than half a million occupying the land, spread out across almost thirty-one thousand square miles. Documentation of this time is slim, and some of it is considered somewhat unreliable, but there are notes detailing a good deal of abandoned land. It is little surprise, then, that some histories of small Scottish towns from the time will sometimes claim that smaller villages possessed only two roads, and sometimes fewer than eight homes. It can be reasonably estimated that there were likely around ten thousand Scots inhabiting Edinburgh at the turn of the sixteenth century, with other large towns having populations around one thousand.

This ultimately meant that most Scottish communities and villages were familiar with one another. They lived, farmed, fought (when called upon), and died together. They were, like most other nations of the time, monarchial in governance, but the typical Scotsman did not have much to do with the Crown. In fact, they did not have much to do with the rest of the world. For the average medieval peasant living in Scotland (or anywhere else,

for that matter), there was a very real sense of simply desiring to live a peaceful life. There was no such thing as twenty-four-hour news cycles; certainly news traveled then, but incredibly slowly. There were, however, snippets of news that traveled more swiftly than others. As William Manchester put it in his history of the medieval era:

> Yet if news was electrifying, it could pass from village to village and even across the Channel, borne word-of-mouth. That is what happened after Luther affixed his theses to the church door. Before the first week in November had ended, spontaneous demonstrations supporting or condemning him had erupted throughout Germany.[5]

This same news spread quickly across the rest of the European continent as well. After all, Luther's defiance of Roman Catholic practice had sparked a fire, and it spread faster than the papacy could extinguish it. Soon, even the Scots were considering what it meant to be a Christian. There were, of course, other issues that the pontiff had faced in Scotland, but the Protestant Reformation was a fire that they simply would not be able to control to their liking. It may not have been as obvious as in places such as Germany and England until the middle of the century, but Reformation ideals *were* spreading in Scotland. As Moffat explains:

> As an underground movement whose promoters risked hideous deaths for their beliefs, Protestantism and its rise are difficult to detect in Scotland in the decades after Luther famously objected to the sale of indulgences. But there can be little doubt that his ideas and those of other reformers were quietly spreading, their acceptance and understanding fueled by the availability of William Tyndale's translation of the New Testament into English after 1526. John Knox later claimed that the majority of the

5 William Manchester, *A World Lit Only by Fire* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1992), 193.

> populations of eight burghs, those who lived in Ayr, Brechin, Dundee, Perth, Edinburgh, Montrose, St Andrews, and Stirling, had renounced Catholicism by 1559. The reality was probably that only Perth and Dundee were overwhelmingly Protestant. It is inevitably the case that revolutions are sparked by minorities, but political events also helped accelerate the pace of change.[6]

Ultimately, though, until the Protestant Reformation, religious life in the villages of Scotland was not all too different from that of most other European villages of the day. The medieval era had been dominated by the teachings of Roman Catholicism, and Scotland was just as polluted with those same teachings. Boys and girls alike were baptized as babies, taken to Roman Mass, preached at in Latin (an inaccessible tongue), and made to live—well—as Roman Catholics.

The problem, of course, was that this resulted in a society that was largely unconverted.[7] There were true doctrines taught among the falsehoods, but how was anyone to know the difference? And while some of the finer theological points were reserved for the academics and their seminaries, there was a general superstitious way of thinking that undergirded much of life. The Scots were well acquainted with fairy tales and folk stories and actively utilized them to explain much of what occurred in the natural world. Before the spread of Christianity, beliefs abounded in things such as the fae (or fairies), who were thought to be beings of divine origin. Myths about giants who worked to create the landscape, banshees who would wail to herald the death of a loved one, and other woodland creatures also existed.

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6 Alistair Moffat, *Scotland: A History from Earliest Times*, loc. 4137 of 12933, Kindle.

7 Make no mistake: Sinners are saved through faith in Jesus Christ alone and by God's grace alone. One need not necessarily believe in the *five solas* to be saved, but Rome had so conflated the gospel with false teachings that it is hard to believe many were converted at all during that time, although, of course, some were converted by the grace of God.

Would John Knox have heard all these tales of fae and banshees, mingling them together with the Roman Catholic traditions in which he was brought up? It is likely that his own family and community would have had their own spin on these Scottish myths and legends, which in turn would have been used in a way similar to the telling of *Grimms' Fairy Tales*—to teach children basic morality, such as learning to listen obediently to their parents, and to keep them from entering unknown dangers.

But what of the boy's lineage?

Of Obscure Parentage

Like everything else involving John Knox's early years, little is known about his parents. What we do know is that his father, William Knox, was a merchant, and his mother's maiden name was Sinclair. (In some of the more turbulent times of his life, John would occasionally try to partially disguise his identity by signing his name as "John Sinclair.") Ultimately, this means that Knox's parentage played very little role, as far as society was concerned, in earning him a place of distinction. In fact, in a poem prepared by John Davidson, Knox's lineage was openly acknowledged as being quite low:

> First, he desednit bot of linage small;
> As commonly God usis for to call
> The sempill sort His summondis till expres;
> Sa calling him, He gave him giftis withall
> Maist excellent, beside his Uprichtnes.[8]

His was a lowly origin, even though there is evidence that the Knox family name was a longstanding one in Scotland and was well thought of by those around them. Evidently, Knox loved his family and admired them a great deal. Though he did not write often about his family or upbringing, it has recently been discovered

8 John Davidson, "Brief Commendatioun of Uprichtness," in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 3, ed. Rev. Charles Rogers LL.D. (London: J. and W. Rider, Printers, Bartholomew Close, 1874), 249.

that he signed a letter to Genevan pastors as "Tinoterius," which interestingly designated him as "a man from the banks of the Tyne."[9] It was common for Scots to take great pride in their families, and it seems Knox did the same, though he wrote little of it.

In one of the rare instances in which Knox wrote and spoke of his own family, he alluded to his father's service in the Scottish army under King James IV. In March of 1562, when he met with James Hepburn, 4th Earl of Bothwell (who would later become husband of Mary, Queen of Scots, and thus king consort of Scotland in 1567), Knox recorded that he spoke thus to the Earl of Bothwell:

> Albeit to this hour it hath not chanced me to speak with your Lordship face to face, yet have I borne a good mind to your house.... My grandfather, goodsire, and father, have served your Lordship's predecessors, and some of them have died under their standards.[10]

In other words, Knox speaks to the service of his grandfather and father in the Scottish army and alludes to their deaths while in service to the Crown. In fact, elsewhere Knox referred to the Battle of Flodden in a melancholic manner, calling it the "unhappy field of Flodden."[11] There is, of course, no way of knowing for certain whether Knox meant that his grandfather, father, or perhaps some other relative, had died in this battle, but it seems likely that Knox's family knew some loss or other because of the devastation at the Battle of Flodden in 1513.[12]

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9 Jane Dawson, *John Knox* (London: Yale University Press, 2015), 13.

10 John Knox, *The History of the Reformation in Scotland: A Twentieth Century Edition*, ed. Cuthbert Lennox (London: Andrew Melrose, 1905), 251.

11 Knox, *History*, 5.

12 Of course, if Knox was born in 1515 as most historians suggest today, his father could not possibly have perished in 1513. However, there is the possibility that Knox was actually born sometime in 1514, and thus his father potentially passed away while his mother was pregnant with him.

Whatever the case, we have a tiny portrait of the family that can be painted for our minds. They were not of nobility and were called upon to serve and fight for the Crown. His father, at some point, became a merchant, and though he fought some battles for Scotland against England, there is nothing that suggests that he was especially famous for any sort of heroic feat. Most likely, the family—which consisted of father (William Knox), mother (a former Sinclair), first son (William, born probably around 1504), second son (John), and perhaps a few others—were content to live, work, and die in peace, without ever coming before the public eye.

They would, of course, have attended the parish church of St. Mary's, known as the "Lamp of Lothians," which was located along the River Tyne and across from Giffordgate Street in Haddington, in East Lothian.[13] John would have been baptized here, and if the Reformation had never begun, he likely would have been buried here as well. In fact, with John and his family living across from the parish church, with its distinguished structure and visage a constant sight before their eyes, the indelible marks of Roman Catholicism would have been impossible to escape.

So how did John Knox escape it? How did the Roman Catholic boy become a Reformed man? We must now turn our attention to the sparks that lit the Reformer's fire.

13 Dawson, *John Knox*, 11.