



ONE

Young Preacher

(c. 1514–47)



Wielding astonishing influence over Scotland in the sixteenth century, John Knox (c. 1514–72) was one of the most heroic leaders and towering figures in the annals of church history. Regarded as ‘the Father of the Scottish Reformation’ and ‘the Founder of the Scottish Protestant Church,’ Knox was a spiritual *tour de force* of unmatched vigor in spreading the kingdom of God. With resolute convictions, this fiery Reformer established his native land as an impenetrable fortress of biblical truth, one that would reverberate throughout the known world. If Martin Luther was the hammer of the Reformation and John Calvin the pen, John Knox was the trumpet.

Given his immense impact upon Scotland’s history and the larger evangelical world, it is time to reintroduce Knox to a new





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generation of Christian believers. Predominantly forgotten in the modern era, his grave lies beneath a parking lot on the south side of St. Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh. There is a great need in this present hour for Knox to be resurrected in the memory of all those who share his biblical convictions. This book contributes to that effort by profiling the extraordinary life and powerful preaching of this luminous Scottish Reformer.

At the dawn of the sixteenth century, a thick spiritual darkness veiled the land of Scotland. The religious superstitions of Rome held the nation with an ironclad grip. The Bible was virtually a closed book, and the gospel of grace had been eclipsed by a popish religion of works-righteousness. The clergy groped about in spiritual ignorance as blind leaders of the blind. A famine of the hearing of the Word of God had left the nation impoverished and spiritually emaciated. It was into such a spiritual drought that John Knox, like a Scottish Jeremiah, providentially entered this world.

The early days of John Knox's life did not reveal that he would one day be a leader of his nation and of the church. He was a man of humble beginnings. Though he would receive a fine education and was mentored by men strong in the faith, these traits alone did not set Knox apart or enable him to have such significant impact. The story of John Knox's life is the story of the God who delights in raising up insignificant people to bring glory to His name. The young John Knox was a man like any other. As he placed his life in God's hands, however, he became the mighty trumpet whose clarion call would echo across the land.

Today, Knox's legacy is that of a passionate preacher and prominent Reformer. But before he was a Reformer, he was a 'Reformer in the making.' His skills as an expositor of God's Word and as a prophetic challenger of the status quo were developed over a period of years and even decades. God laid a foundation in Knox's boyhood that would later hold





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firm through the storms of life, faithfully building him up piece by piece into the man he would become.

Beginnings (c. 1514–35)

John Knox was born around the year 1514 in Haddington, East Lothian, Scotland, which is located about fifteen miles east of Edinburgh.¹ This relatively obscure place was a small town of some 1,500 inhabitants. Knox's parents, members of the Roman Catholic Church, placed a high value upon a proper education and enrolled their son in the local Haddington Grammar School. It was here that his immense intellect first began to be sharpened and shaped.

Knox then entered the prestigious University of St. Andrews (1529), the oldest and one of the most famous university in Scotland. At the university, Knox studied under the noted theologian, philosopher, and scholar John Major, and he proved to be an ardent student. He graduated from St. Andrews in 1536, earning the M.A. degree, and then taught briefly as an assistant professor. Though there is little record of Knox's activity during these years of study, his later habits of Bible reading and commentary study suggest that he was an avid student and one who thought carefully about theological, political, and social matters. His studies at St. Andrews further honed his intellectual acumen.

Finding His Place (1536–43)

Soon thereafter, Knox was ordained to the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church by the Bishop of Dunblane (April 1536). Knox so excelled that he took clerical orders even before he reached the age fixed by church canons. As he pressed forward in his new role, he became further entrenched in the same encumbrances of Catholic dogma that had for centuries robbed the Scottish people of the saving knowledge of God.

1 The year of John Knox's birth is properly analyzed by Jasper Ridley in Jasper Ridley, *John Knox* (New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 531.





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Unable to find a parish in which to serve, Knox became a papal notary, a legal officer who could authenticate documents. During this period, the Roman church owned more than half of the real estate in Scotland and gathered an annual income equal to almost eighteen times that of the Scottish crown. Consequently, the position of a papal notary was an important role within the Scottish church.

Knox also served as a private tutor to the sons of two gentry (untitled aristocratic) families in East Lothian from 1540 to 1543. Both families, the Douglasses of Longniddry and the Cockburns of Ormiston, were known for their Protestant beliefs. They surely would have exerted some initial gospel influence upon this young, bright teacher. His work with them indicates some openness to these revolutionary doctrines. His experience as a tutor may also have shaped his ability to relate pastorally to others. Though his public persona from the pulpit was often demonstrative, nevertheless he had a pastoral side to his ministry, able to address individuals in light of their own needs and concerns. Thus, while Knox was maturing in his teaching abilities, God had placed him in an environment where he would encounter in a preliminary way the Protestant perspectives that he would one day champion.

Conversion and Growth (1543-44)

The exact time of John Knox's conversion is not known, however it is clear that by the end of March 1543 he was committed to the Christian gospel. His conversion was probably through the preaching of Thomas Guillanne, an ex-Dominican friar and chaplain to the Earl of Arran. Guillanne, it was said, was 'the first man from whom Mr. Knox received any taste of the truth.'² At the end of his life, while on his deathbed, Knox would ask his wife to read to him the seventeenth chapter

2 David Calderwood, *History of the Kirk of Scotland*, Vol 1, p. 156.





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of John. It was there, he said, 'I first cast my anchor.'³ The truths in this chapter, which records the High Priestly Prayer of our Lord, proved to be the solid rock on which Knox first anchored himself to Jesus Christ by faith alone.

Guillanne also gave Knox his first in-depth exposure to Reformed doctrine. Now recognizing the polluted system of Rome for what it was—contaminated and corrupt—Knox confessed, 'It pleased God to call me from the puddle of Papistry.'⁴ For the next two years, Knox devoted himself to the meticulous study of Scripture in a diligent search for a deeper knowledge of the truth.

From Bodyguard to Reformer (1545–46)

As Knox grew in his new faith, George Wishart, a powerful Reformed preacher, began a preaching itinerancy in southern Scotland. When he came to East Lothian, Knox became one of his closest disciples and followers. In a relatively short period of time, Wishart exercised strong influence over Knox in the Reformed faith (December 1545–March 1546). This intense exposure would profoundly shape Knox's ministry for the remainder of his life. From Wishart, Knox learned boldness and courage in ministry, as well as faithfulness to Reformed doctrine in preaching.

As Wishart's ministry gained increasing visibility, his strong preaching drew serious threats upon his life. With supreme loyalty, Knox soon became Wishart's personal assistant and bodyguard. He protected his spiritual mentor with a two-handed sword, ready to defend him to the death.

3 William Mackergo Taylor, *John Knox* (New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1885), p. 199.

4 *The Works of John Knox*, ed. David Laing, Vol. 3 (Edinburgh: Bannatyne Society, 1846), p. 439.





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By this bold step, Knox's exceptional courage in standing and fighting for the truth first began to emerge.

Religious tension and persecution reached fever pitch in December 1545, and Wishart was arrested and taken to St. Andrews Castle. When Knox attempted to physically defend his mentor, Wishart insisted that he go back to Longniddry. Wishart implored his loyal bodyguard: 'Return to your bairns (pupils), and God bless you. One is sufficient for one sacrifice.'⁵

Wishart was burned at the stake on 1 March 1546, at St. Andrews Castle, by the nephew of the same archbishop, David Beaton, who had in 1528 martyred Patrick Hamilton, the first Reformed preacher in Scotland in this era. As the flames flashed across his body, Wishart cried out:

I beseech Thee, Father of heaven, to forgive them that have of any ignorance or else of any evil mind, forged any lies upon me. I forgive them with all my heart. I beseech Christ to forgive them that have condemned me to death this day ignorantly.⁶

With these dying words, the gospel beacon was passed to John Knox. The flames that consumed Wishart's body ignited Reformation fires that, by means of Knox, would spread through all of Scotland and Great Britain. Historian William G. Blaikie writes: 'The chief result of this murder was to substitute John Knox for George Wishart, as the man of light and leading for the country... Wishart was to Knox as Stephen had been to Paul.'⁷ Though few were aware at the time, the invisible hand of Providence was raising up a new defender of the faith.

5 John Knox, *The History of the Reformation of Religion within the Realm of Scotland* (1898, repr.; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2010), p. 58.

6 Ibid., p. 65.

7 William G. Blaikie, *The Preachers of Scotland* (1888, repr.; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2001), pp. 52-3.





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Called to Preach (1547)

On 29 May 1546, Cardinal Beaton, the man who had put Wishart to death, was himself assassinated in the same St. Andrews Castle. Previously a Catholic stronghold, St. Andrews increasingly became a rallying point for many who were embracing Reformed teaching. Among those who rallied to the castle, strategically located on Scotland's east coast, were John Knox and his young pupils. In addition to his tutoring responsibilities, Knox also taught Scripture to three students, leading them in a systematic study through the Gospel of John. Others soon joined this class, and the superior nature of Knox's teaching gifts became immediately apparent to all.

Due to his obvious and extraordinary ability in handling the Word, Knox was asked to preach to the congregation that had gathered for worship in St. Andrews Castle. In a sermon preached by John Rough, Knox was publicly charged before the congregation to answer what the former believed to be a divine call upon Knox's life. A startled Knox 'burst forth in most abundant tears, and withdrew himself to his chamber.'⁸ Knox strongly believed that he must not run where God had not called him. Locked in his room for days, he underwent much soul-searching until, at last, he stepped forward to answer the call to preach. Knox, now assured of God's summons, presented himself for installation as pastor of the Protestant congregation in the Castle.

Gripped by a sense of direct accountability to God, Knox preached his first public sermon on Daniel 7:24-25 in Holy Trinity Parish Church, St. Andrews. Throughout his exposition, Knox declared his Protestant convictions with unmistakable precision and power. The sermon was delivered with the force

⁸ Knox, *The History of the Reformation of Religion within the Realm of Scotland*, p. 72.



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of a lightning bolt from heaven. It was said by those who heard him, ‘Others sned (lop off) the branches of the papistry, but he striketh at the root also to destroy the whole.’⁹ Some concluded, ‘Master George Wishart never spoke so plainly; and yet he was burnt. Even so will John Knox be.’¹⁰ From this time forward, Knox ministered as a marked man.

After this inaugural sermon, Knox would later affirm that St. Andrews was ‘that place where God first in public opened my mouth to His glory.’¹¹ For the remainder of his life and ministry, Knox asserted, ‘I must be blowing my Master’s trumpet.’¹² Few preachers in the history of the church have ever sounded forth the Word of God with such intense fervor and stong convictions as did this stout Scot.

Once he had confirmed his inward call and responded to the outward call of the St. Andrews congregation, Knox was unwavering in his certainty that God had summoned and commissioned him to preach His Word. He was deeply convinced of the biblical doctrines of the saving gospel of God and was willing to defend it against all social, political, and religious assaults. As Knox emerged onto the scene, he did so as a valiant force ready to sound

9 Knox, *The History of the Reformation of Religion within the Realm of Scotland*, p. 75.

10 Ibid.

11 John J. Murray, *John Knox* (Darlington, England: EP Books, 2011), p. 104.

12 John Knox as quoted by Richard G. Kyle, *The Ministry of John Knox: Pastor, Preacher, and Prophet* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), p. 79.





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forth the trumpet of God's truth in every corner of darkness.

Later generations of fiery preachers would join their voices to Knox's and herald the full counsel of God whether it was popular or not, without stuttering or stammering. One such preacher was Charles Haddon Spurgeon. This 'prince of preachers' was unashamed to identify with both the great Scottish Reformer and his gospel, saying 'John Knox's gospel is my gospel; that which thundered through Scotland must thunder through England again.'¹³

The early years of Knox's life, considered without knowledge of who he would become, may seem unremarkable or common to some. And indeed, in one sense, they are. The details of Knox's family life and schooling are obscure, and what little we do know does not reveal the depth of what was occurring in his mind and heart during these formative years. What we can say definitively is that God was preparing this man for His service, moment by moment and trial by trial.

13 *C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography, Volume I: The Early Years 1834-1859*, a revised edition originally compiled by Susannah Spurgeon and Joseph Harrald (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973), p. 162.

