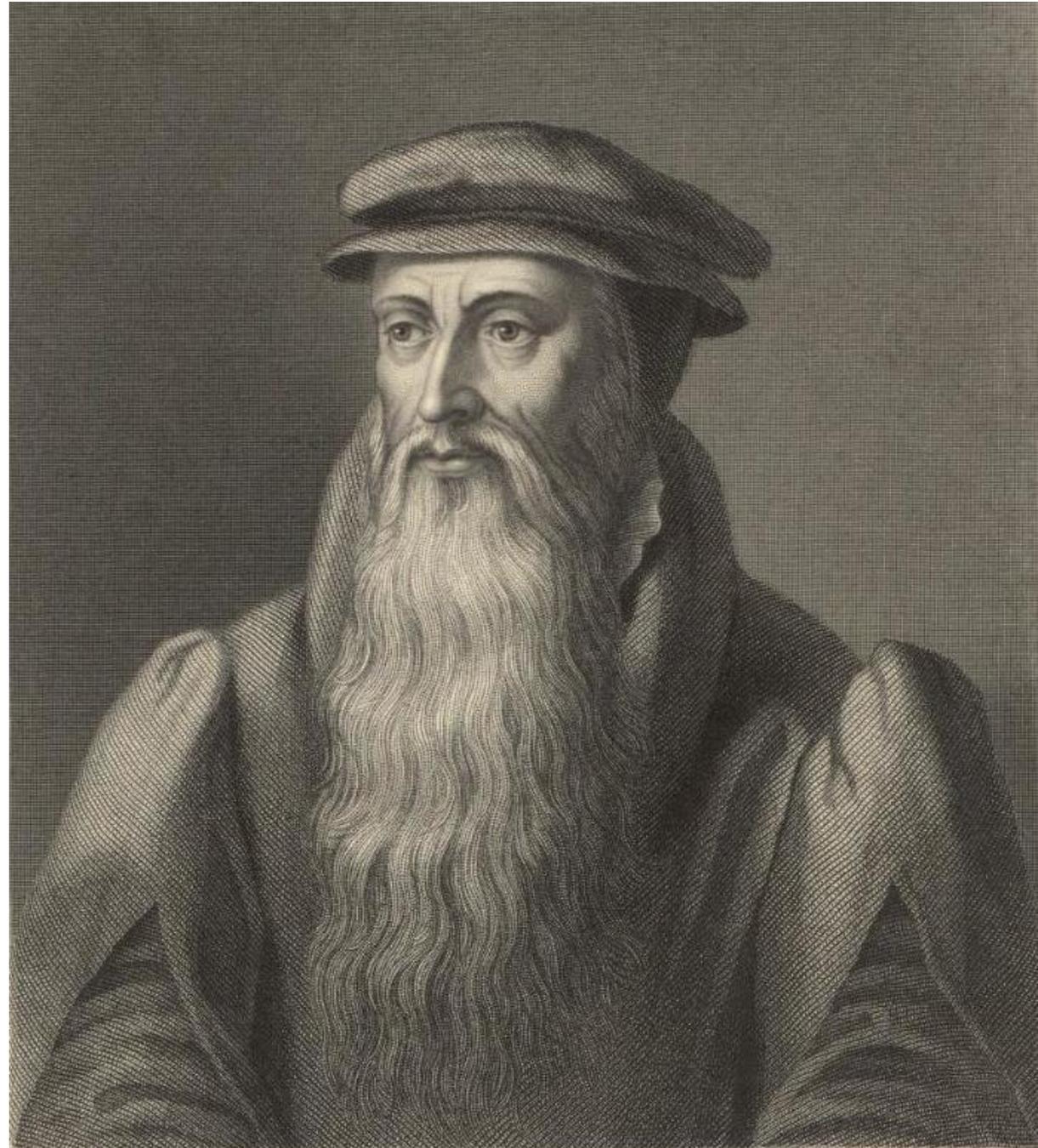


# JOHN KNOX

Scottish Protestant  
Reformer

(c. 1514 – Nov. 24, 1572)



Engraving by William Holl – National Library of Wales

- Before beginning our survey of the life and work of John Knox, we need to “set the stage” regarding the political and social situation of Scotland during the 16th century.
- For much of its history, Scotland had been in conflict with England, militarily, politically and socially.
- England continually sought to dominate Scotland in various ways beginning in the 1100s.
- Scotland looked for political allies for help in remaining independent.
- France became a natural ally of Scotland, although the Reformation caused the alliance to become problematic.

- France and England were historic enemies, beginning from c. 1000 AD.
- Strife between them increased due to the Protestant Reformation beginning in the 1500s.
- With Henry VIII's break from Rome, and the formation of the Church of England, control of Scotland by France became ever more problematic.
- Scotland's position became increasingly difficult when Protestant ideas found fertile soil in that country.
- It is within this difficult political and religious climate that John Knox lived and worked in Scotland and Europe.



- To get an idea of how Scotland measures up with England and France, we can compare Scotland with South Carolina in terms of land area.
- England is about the size of Louisiana.
- France is about two times the size of Colorado, or a little smaller than Texas.

- John Knox was born near Haddington, Scotland, in the southeast part of the country.
- His father William Knox was a merchant, a member of the emerging middle class in Scotland.
- Like Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and others, he was raised in the Roman Catholic church and became a priest.
- The priesthood was the only path for those whose inclinations were academic rather than mercantile, agricultural or military.
- Knox began his education, like most children of his class, in grammar school.

- He proceeded to further studies at the University of St Andrews or possibly at the University of Glasgow.
- He studied under John Major, one of the greatest scholars of the time.
- Knox was ordained a Catholic priest in Edinburgh on Easter Eve of 1536 by William Chisholm, Bishop of Dunblane.
- Knox first appears in official church records in 1540 as a priest and a notary at St. Andrews.
- By 1543, rather than becoming a parish priest, he became the tutor of the children of two Scottish *lairds*.

- Knox was tutor to two sons of Hugh Douglas of Longniddry.
- He also taught the son of John Cockburn of Ormiston.
- Both of these *lairds* had embraced the new religious ideas of the Reformation.
- Serving as tutor to the sons of these families meant that Knox was exposed to the new religious ideas that were sweeping Europe and England.
- George Wishart, a Scottish contemporary of Knox, had openly taught Reformation principles throughout Scotland and England.

- In 1536 Wishart translated the first Helvetic Confession of Faith, written by Swiss reformers Heinrich Bullinger and others, into English.
- Wishart's preaching in 1544–45 helped popularize the teachings of Calvin and Zwingli in Scotland.
- He went from place to place, in danger of his life, denouncing the errors of the Papacy and the abuses in the Catholic churches of Scotland from east to west.



- In January 1546, Wishart was seized by Lord Bothwell on the orders of Roman Catholic Cardinal David Beaton, and sent to Edinburgh Castle.
- Knox was present on the night of Wishart's arrest and was prepared to follow him into captivity, but Wishart persuaded him against this course saying, "Nay, return to your *bairns* [children] and God bless you. One is sufficient for a sacrifice."
- Cardinal Beaton held a "show trial", in which Wishart was tried and convicted on charges of heresy.
- At his trial, Wishart refused to accept that confession was a sacrament, denied free will, and recognized the priesthood of all believing Christians.

- At his trial, Wishart rejected the notion that the infinite God could be “comprehended in one place” between the “priest’s hands,” thereby denying transubstantiation.
- He proclaimed that the true Church was where the Word of God was faithfully preached and the two sacraments of the Lord’s Supper and baptism were rightly administered.
- He also prophesied that Cardinal Beaton would be killed soon.
- Beaton was in fact murdered on May 29, 1546, at his residence in the Castle of St Andrews, by a gang of five persons in revenge for Wishart's execution.

- Knox had avoided being arrested by Lord Bothwell, along with George Wishart, through Wishart's advice to return to tutoring.
- He went back to Hugh Douglas in Longniddry and resumed his tutoring work.
- However, Knox and his pupils were in constant danger from the Catholic (and pro-French) Scottish authorities, and were constantly on the move throughout Scotland.
- The assassins of Cardinal Beaton had taken the Castle of St. Andrews as their Reformation stronghold, and encouraged Knox and his students to come to the castle.

- The French, under Mary of Guise, regent of the Queen of Scotland Mary Stuart, who became queen as a child, determined to retake the castle, and prevent Scotland from becoming a Reformation nation.
- Henry II, king of France, sent ships and soldiers to the Castle of St. Andrew and retook the castle.
- The Protestant nobles and others who had taken refuge in the castle, including Knox, were taken prisoner and forced to row in the French galleys.
- The galley slaves were chained to benches and rowed throughout the day without a change of posture while an officer watched over them with a whip in hand.

- The galley slaves were threatened with torture if they did not give proper signs of reverence when mass was performed on the ship.
- Knox later recounted an incident where he was required to show devotion to a picture of the Virgin Mary.
- He was told to give it a kiss of veneration. He refused and when the picture was pushed up to his face, he seized the picture and threw it into the sea, saying, "Let our Lady now save herself: she is light enough: let her learn to swim."
- After that incident the Scottish prisoners were not forced to do such things again.

- In the summer of 1548, the galleys returned to Scotland to scout for English ships.
- Knox's health was now at its lowest point due to the severity of his confinement. He was ill with a fever and others on the ship were afraid for his life.
- Even in this state, Knox recalled, his mind remained sharp and he comforted his fellow prisoners with hopes of release.
- While the ships were lying offshore between St Andrews and Dundee, the spires of the parish church where he had preached appeared in view.

- James Balfour, a fellow prisoner, asked Knox whether he recognized the landmark.
- Knox replied that he knew it well, recognizing the steeple of the church at St. Andrews where he first preached and he declared that he would not die until he had preached there again.
- In February 1549, after spending a total of 19 months in the galley-prison, Knox was released, along with other Scotsmen.
- Historical records don't clearly show how Knox regained his freedom, but it appears English noblemen made deals with the French for the return of the prisoners.

- After his release, Knox went to England and began his real work as a reformer under King Edward VI, Henry VIII's son, who was Protestant.
- While in England, Knox stirred up controversy with his views that the Church of England had too many practices that were straight out of the Roman Catholic mass and theology.
- Edward VI died on July 6, 1553 at the age of 15, and he was succeeded by Mary Tudor in 1554. Mary was Catholic and shortly after her accession to the throne, began to restore England to be a Catholic nation once again.

With England no longer safe for Protestant preachers, Knox left for the Continent in January 1554 on the advice of friends. On the eve of his flight, he wrote:

“Sometime I have thought that impossible it had been, so to have removed my affection from the realm of Scotland, that any realm or nation could have been equal dear to me. But God I take to record in my conscience, that the troubles present (and appearing to be) in the realm of England are double more dolorous unto my heart than ever were the troubles of Scotland.”

- Knox first came to Frankfurt, Germany, and then went to Geneva, Switzerland, where he spent some time with Calvin.
- He also stayed with Heinrich Bullinger, another reformer, at Zurich, Switzerland.
- Knox was not alone in his exile. The **Marian exiles** were English Protestants who fled to Continental Europe during the 1553–1558 reign of Roman Catholic Mary Tudor, who became Queen Mary I.
- Many English Protestants settled in various parts of Europe, mainly the Netherlands, Germany and Switzerland. There was a large settlement in Frankfurt, Germany.

- As would be expected, many of the exiles were Protestant clergymen and theologians. The rest were members of the English aristocracy, merchants and tradesmen, artisans, printers, lawyers, etc.
- Among them was Miles Coverdale, Bible translator and preacher.
- Led mainly by Knox, the largest and most politically and theologically radical concentration of English exiles was at Geneva, reaching a peak of 233 people or about 140 households.
- This was the first English congregation to adopt the entirely Presbyterian form of discipline and worship that had been resisted in Frankfurt.

- Knox had spent time with Calvin in Geneva, and was profoundly influenced by Calvin's theology and religious teachings.
- Knox asked Calvin four difficult political questions:
  1. Whether a minor could rule by divine right.
  2. Whether a female could rule and transfer sovereignty to her husband.
  3. Whether people should obey ungodly or idolatrous rulers.
  4. What party godly persons should follow if they resisted an idolatrous ruler.

- Knox's work in Geneva was laying the foundations for what would become the Church of Scotland, or The Kirk.
- Knox had become convinced that the Church of England's practices and form of church government was still too close to Rome.
- Knox's work culminated in the *Book of Geneva* in 1556.
- Knox's book went through several printings and was used in both the Geneva church and in Scotland.
- Sometimes titled *Book of Our Common Order*, it is the basis for the modern [Book of Common Order](#) used by Presbyterian churches today.

- The English church in Geneva was also where the Geneva Bible was produced, which was to be the most popular English version of the era.
- The Geneva Bible was also most well-known for its annotations that supported Reformed theology and hinted at political resistance.
- At Geneva Knox wrote his infamous *First Blast of the Trumpet Blowen Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* during the winter of 1557–58.
- Published in Geneva in the spring of 1558, it denounced all female rulers in the most strident language.

- *The First Blast of the Trumpet* attacks female monarchs, arguing that rule by females is contrary to the Bible.
- Knox's book was directed against Queen Mary I of England (Mary Tudor, reigned July 1553 – Nov. 1558), who was Roman Catholic, and Mary Queen of Scots (Mary Stuart, reigned Dec. 1542 – July 1567), also Roman Catholic.
- Knox was not just opposed to the religion of these queens.



The title page of a 1766 edition of *The first blast*, with modernized spelling of the title

- Knox's work had three points:
  1. *Gynarchy* (government by women) is "repugnant to Nature";
  2. "...a contumlie [an offense] to God";
  3. "the subversion of good order."
- Knox sought to show that political rule by a queen was unbiblical and contrary to the natural order of things.
- Knox argued: "God, by the order of his creation, has [deprived] woman of authority and dominion" and from history that "man has seen, proved, and pronounced just causes why it should be."



QUEEN MARY I OF ENGLAND  
(MARY TUDOR)  
“Bloody Mary”

- Knox appealed to the common belief that women were supposed to come after men because Eve came after (and from) Adam.
- Furthermore, God’s anger against Eve for taking the forbidden fruit had continued and all women were therefore punished by being subjected to men.
- In his analysis of the Creation, Knox furthered his argument by stating that women were created in the image of God "only with respect to creatures, not with respect to man".
- Knox believed that men were a superior reflection of God and women were an inferior reflection.

- Knox had discussed these points with Calvin, but Calvin had not agreed with Knox.
- Calvin argued that God had given authority to biblical female leaders Deborah and Huldah, in the Book of Judges.
- But, Knox said, God had not given that authority to any female in the 16th century.

MARY, QUEEN OF SCOTS



- Further, according to Knox, Deborah and Huldah did not claim the right to pass on their authority, but the queens did.
- One of Calvin's arguments was that gynarchy was acceptable since Moses had sanctioned the daughters of Zelophehad (Numbers 27) to receive an inheritance.
- Knox refuted this by saying that receiving an inheritance was not equivalent to gaining a civil office.
- Calvin had told Knox that Mary I's rule was sanctioned because the English Parliament and the general public had agreed to it.

- Knox countered this in *The First Blast* by stating that it did not matter if man agreed to the rule if God did not agree to it as well.
- Finally, Knox disagreed with Calvin on the idea that gynarchy could be acceptable because it was a national custom.
- Knox conversely believed that Biblical authority and God's will made Calvin's argument invalid.
- Most Christians in the 16th century believed it was their Christian duty to always follow their monarch.

- Knox believed it was worse for a Christian to follow a ruler that was evil.
- He claimed that, if needed, a rebellion should take place to dethrone an evil queen.
- Many in Scotland agreed with Knox that it was not natural for women to rule but they did not agree with his belief that the queens should be replaced.
- Because of Knox's bold call to action, his contemporaries began to consider Knox as a revolutionary.
- Knox's work *The First Blast* created problems for him not just in Scotland, but in England as well.

- Queen Mary I of England died on Nov. 17, 1558.
- Elizabeth, her half-sister, took the throne of England as Elizabeth I.
- One of her first actions as queen was the establishment of an English Protestant church, of which she became the supreme governor.
- This Elizabethan Religious Settlement was to evolve into the Church of England.



- Knox had published *The First Blast* anonymously and did not tell Calvin, who denied knowledge of it until a year after its publication, that he had written it.
- In England, the pamphlet was officially condemned by royal proclamation.
- The impact of the document became further complicated when Elizabeth Tudor became Queen of England.
- Although Knox had not targeted Elizabeth, he had deeply offended her, and she never forgave him.

- With a Protestant on the throne, the English refugees in Geneva prepared to return home.
- Knox himself decided to return to Scotland.
- Before his departure, various honors were conferred on him, including the freedom of the city of Geneva (similar with being presented the key to the city).
- Knox left in January 1559, but he did not arrive in Scotland until May, owing to Elizabeth's refusal to issue him a passport through England.
- Although England had a Protestant queen, Scotland still had the Roman Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots.

- The French Mary of Guise, mother of Mary Queen of Scots, was the regent of Scotland until Mary became an adult. She died in 1560.
- European Protestantism hung in the balance, for Mary Stuart was now queen of France, having married Francis II of France in 1558, and threatened to tie Scotland to Catholic France and thus isolate Protestant England.
- Catholics in England and Scotland thought Mary had a stronger claim to the English throne than Elizabeth.
- Scotland was torn between Catholic and Protestant factions.

- Mary's illegitimate half-brother, the Earl of Moray, was a leader of the Protestants, but she did not move against him.
- Knox preached against Mary, condemning her for hearing Mass, dancing, and dressing too elaborately.
- Mary summoned Knox to her presence to remonstrate with him but was unsuccessful.
- She later charged him with treason but he was acquitted and released.
- Mary's husband Francis II died in Dec. 1560, but Mary focused on her claim to the English throne.

- About the same time as Mary Queen of Scots arrived in Scotland from France, the Scottish Parliament had ratified the the 25 articles of the Calvinist Confession of Faith that Knox and his associates had prepared.
- They also cut Scotland's ties with Rome, annulled previous anti-Protestant acts, and condemned the Mass.
- A Book of Discipline was also prepared, and although it was not approved by Parliament, its proposals for the government of the Scottish church were accepted by the General Assembly of the church.

- This work provided a constitution and disciplinary rules for the Reformed Church of Scotland.
- The government of the church was organized on the principle of democratic assemblies, beginning with the parish church and extending upward through the synods to the General Assembly.
- Representative leadership in church government was developed through the elected and ordained elders, or presbyters.
- The goal was to follow the New Testament pattern of church government and worship.

- The Scottish church with its presbyterian system thus differed from the Anglican episcopal church with its bishops and more "Catholic" forms of worship.
- The principle of popular (representative) leadership in Scotland, however, meant that the church there had a much greater impact on the lives of the people.
- The English clergy, often drawn from the ranks of the younger sons of the nobility and not too well educated for the ministry, were also less popular and less respected than their Scottish counterparts.

- In 1559, Knox began writing *The History of the Reformation in Scotland* in five volumes. He finished the work in 1566.
- Conditions in Scotland worsened, and soon developed into a civil war.
- Queen Mary was forced to abdicate when her second husband Lord Darnley was murdered, and she married his murderer, the Earl of Bothwell.
- Mary's infant son was crowned as James VI. On July 29, 1567, Knox preached James VI's coronation sermon at the church in Stirling.

- Knox continued to preach and write, despite the continuing warfare between Protestant and Catholic Scottish nobles. He died on Nov. 24, 1572.
- Knox presents us with some paradoxes:
  - Knox was a minister of the Christian gospel who appeared to advocate violent revolution.
  - He was considered one of the most powerful preachers of his day, but only two of the hundreds of sermons he preached were ever published.
  - He is a key figure in the formation of modern Scotland, yet there is only one monument erected to him in Scotland. His grave is unmarked.

Though he remains a paradox to many, Knox was clearly a man of great courage: one man standing before Knox's open grave said, "Here lies a man who neither flattered nor feared any flesh."

Knox's legacy is large: his spiritual progeny includes some 750,000 Presbyterians in Scotland, 3 million in the United States, and many millions more worldwide.

