



What Would John Knox Have to Say to Us Today?

We are commemorating this evening the quincentenary of the birth of John Knox. We are doing it in a nation that has airbrushed him out of history. We are doing it in a church situation where people have long forgotten what Knox and the Reformation was all about. We are doing it in a Reformed context where there has been a significant shift in the attitude taken by ministers and others to the Pope and the Roman Catholic system. I could spend ages describing to you the tragic condition of church and nation in our day but you know it too well and I want to get on with the subject in hand: What would John Knox have to say to us today? I mention seven things and it is not a comprehensive presentation.

1. Where is your thankfulness for the glorious Reformation?

Less than two centuries after the Reformation Ralph Erskine complained:

'Where is the man that remembers duly the great deliverance that God gave to Scotland at the first plantation of the Gospel when He paid such an early visit to us when we were nothing but a pack of blind pagans, when we were worshipping nothing but stocks and stones and devils? Where is the man that remembers the great deliverance He wrought for us at the glorious Reformation, when He threw down the bulwarks of Popery, so many ages after He demolished the bulwarks of paganism? Where is the man that remembers the merciful deliverance wrought for us at the Revolution? 'Oh! ungrateful Scotland! How have we forgotten our solemn covenanted allegiance to our glorious Deliverer. This forgetfulness is the mother of apostasy. If we forget our duty we forsake our duty; if we forget God, we forsake God and depart from Him. This forgetfulness provokes God: and when the city forgets what He hath done for it, this provokes God to do no more for the city. It provokes God instead of works of deliverance and mercy, to work some work of judgment and to perform a strange work'.

In 1557 a group of Protestant nobles, with the guidance of John Knox, entered into a covenant to make Scotland a Protestant nation. In the mercy of God this came about in August 1560. It is mainly to John Knox under God that we owe the deliverance. In 1560 Knox led a great service of thanksgiving for the merciful deliverance. In 2010 there was a conference in Edinburgh organised by the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholics and opened by Alex Salmond to commemorate (so-called) the Reformation. It was simply undermining the principles of the Reformation and that is what the current outlook in church and state is busy doing.

2. Where is your sense of the majesty and glory of God?

The realisation of the glory and majesty of God shaped the lives of John Calvin and John Knox. They lived *coram deo* (in the presence of God). Calvin recovered and embodied a passion for the absolute reality and majesty of God. Knox *'cared supremely about the glory of God in Christ being worked into the very warp and woof of Scotland, which for Knox began in the heart of every man, woman and child'*. It was this relentless orientation towards the glory of God that gave coherence to their lives and to the Reformed movements they inspired. Says David Wells: *'It is this God, majestic and holy in His being, this God whose love knows no bounds because His holiness knows no limits, who has disappeared from the modern evangelical world'*. The displacing of God from the centre of the professing Christian Church has been going on for more than a century. Out of this has come a Christianity harmonised with the religious

aspirations of man and giving the glory to man. It is centred in man and his need of salvation. To quote David Wells again: *'The centrality of God is disappearing. God comes now to rest lightly and inconsequentially upon the church'*. Where the centre shifts from God everything begins to shift everywhere.

3. Where is your zeal for the honour of God?

It was zeal for the honour of God that led Knox into confrontation. He says in his History of the Reformation:

'Thus did light and darkness strive within the realm of Scotland; the darkness ever before the world suppressing the light, from the death of that notable servant of God, Master Patrick Hamilton, unto the death of Edward Sixth that most godly and most virtuous King that hath been known to have reigned in England or elsewhere ... Satan intended nothing less than that the light of Jesus Christ should have been utterly extinguished within the whole Isle of Britain (but the persecution under Mary scattered the Reformers, some to Scotland). Last came John Knox, in the end of harvest, in the year of God 1555'.

The whole conflict of the Reformation was as Knox constantly affirmed *'a battle against the rage of Satan'*. The Reformers began with the problem that had caused the Babylonian captivity. They were confrontational against error, false prophets and teachers. Knox took his stand against error. He risked everything for the sake of principles.

Knox would consider peaceful co-existence with a false religion inconceivable. Where a church is overtaken by unbelief and error there must be militancy. Truth carries with it confrontation. The conflict between light and darkness must go on. The church that ceases to be militant ceases to be the church. Horatius Bonar said in 1883: *'Fellowship between faith and unbelief must sooner or later be fatal to the former'*. Union with unbelief was fatal in the Scottish church in the latter years of the 19th century. It was again so in the latter years of the 20th century. The Church of Scotland had a strong body of evangelicals in the 1970s and 1980s but ministers failed to fight against heresy in the church courts; as Rev Ian Hamilton confessed, *'we were too pragmatic, too unbiblical'*. The cause was lost and worse errors have come in as a judgment on that church. The evangelical 'remnant' are being fragmented into various groupings with some fleeing to a Free Church of Scotland which seems to be on the downgrade.

John Calvin said *'A dog barks when his master is attacked. I would be a coward if I saw that God's truth is attacked and yet would remain silent'*. We are likely to be criticised as negative. This was true before. As has been pointed out recently,

'J Gresham Machen's engagement in the debates of his day points us to the value and necessity of controversy, as well as the inevitability and pain of criticism, even from our brothers. His colleague, Charles Erdman, publicly accused Machen of "unkindness, suspicion, bitterness and intolerance". When he voted against a church resolution in favour of the national Prohibition and the 18th Amendment, he was criticised as a secret drunkard and promoter of vice. Since he was single, he was criticised as being naive and unaware of the responsibilities of the family'.

4. Where is your aversion to Rome?

Romanism, said Calvin, *'destroyed the glory of Christ in many ways – by calling upon the saints to intercede, when Christ is the one Mediator between God and man; by adoring the Blessed Virgin, when Christ alone shall be adored; by offering a continual sacrifice in the Mass, when the sacrifice of Christ upon the Cross is complete and sufficient'*. Knox believed that *'the Mass is abominable idolatry, blasphemous to the death of Christ and a profanation of the Lord's Supper'*. He regarded the Roman system as not only idolatrous but also destructive of men's souls. He passionately hated that which destroys souls. He hated the system which

blinded people to the necessity of faith and salvation by the blood of Jesus Christ. He stated that one Mass *'was more powerful to him than if ten thousand armed enemies were landed in any part of the Realm, of the purpose to suppress the whole of religion'*.

The constant reference to the Old Testament prophets in Knox's preaching and writing was not a coincidence. Knox saw clear parallels between the spiritual adultery of Israel and that of his own time, so it was a small step to conclude that the same punishments would follow in his day as had occurred then. Those who attended Mass could expect to be rebuked by God through sufferings and persecution. Knox's view of history was that *'false worship had always led, could only lead, to one end: the destruction of the nation that practised it'*. The celebration of the Mass was totally abolished in Scotland in August 1560. Our Free Church forefathers took the Knox and the Confessional view on the Mass as blasphemous and the Pope as the Antichrist. Alas what a change has come about! So-called Reformed men in the Free Church and elsewhere are quite happy to hold ecumenical services with Roman Catholic priests.

David Robertson of Dundee in an interview on BBC radio Scotland on 16 September 2010 said that he welcomed the Pope (Benedict) as a fellow Christian:

'I would disagree with the Pope about many things. I would disagree about it being a state visit. I would disagree on condoms and so on but I would like to welcome him to Scotland. I think the Pope himself is an intelligent, thoughtful man. I think he is right about secularism. I think most of all the Pope is right about Christ. Owen Dudley Edwards earlier this morning commented about the Free Church and the Pope's book on Jesus and I think it is one of the best books on Jesus that I have ever read, so I would like to welcome him as a fellow Christian. Personally I would love to meet him and hear him. I feel perfectly free to disagree with many things that he stands for and says but overall I think it is a good thing that he is here'.

A studio guest that morning responded, *'Isn't that amazing, John? That is a Free Church of Scotland minister. This could not have happened thirty or forty years ago. The Free Church would have come down on him like a ton of bricks. Thank you David for what you said because this is the voice of reason'.*

5. Where is your priority of preaching?

John Knox was above everything a preacher of God's Word. He constantly referred to his preaching as *'blowing the Master's trumpet'*. He could say: *'Without the preaching place I think few would have occasion to be offended at me; and there I am not master of myself, but must obey Him who commands me to speak plain and to flatter no flesh on the face of the earth'*. It would be true to say that Knox's Bible-centred and Spirit-filled preaching proved to be the critical turning points in the course of the Reformation in Scotland.

Knox's first Sermon 1547 in St Andrews on Daniel 7:24-25 struck at the very roots of the Papacy and introduced the twin objectives that would mark Knox's preaching for the rest of his life. He would rail against tyrants – ecclesiastical and political – who set themselves against the Most High and he would tenderly call lost sinners to repentance and faith in Christ.

Sermon 11th May 1559 Perth was *'vehement against idolatry'* and had the effect of rallying Protestant sympathizers to break the yoke of Roman tyranny. Statues of Mary and the saints were toppled and crushed into rubble. Perth was the place where Cardinal Beaton had hanged four men for breaking Lent and had executed a young mother by drowning for praying in Jesus' name instead of Mary's.

Sermon 11th June 1559 in St Andrews on Christ cleansing the temple in Jerusalem. The thrust was that the church must throw off all vestiges of the old Roman religion. The Provost agreed to set up Reformed worship in the town, and no less than twenty-one priests made renunciation of the old faith and profession of the new.

Sermon 8th November 1559 in Stirling on Psalm 80:4-6 when after a breakdown of morale in the Congregation he showed the need of complete dependence on God for victory. This became one of the great turning points in the history of the Scottish Reformation.

Sermons in the summer of 1560 in St Giles on the Prophecy of Haggai summoning all men to help in the rebuilding of God's temple. This was in the weeks when members were assembling for the meeting of Parliament that would repudiate the Pope's authority, abolish the celebration of the Mass and agree on a Confession of Faith.

No wonder Lord Thomas Randolph wrote to Sir William Cecil: *'I assure you the voice of one man is able in one hour to put more life in us than five hundred trumpets continually blustering in our ears'*. Dr Lloyd-Jones in his address in the Usher Hall at the Quarter Centenary of the Reformation in 1960 said of the preaching of Knox: *'It was prophetic preaching, not priestly preaching. What we have today is what I would call priestly. Very nice, very ornate, sentences turned beautifully, prepared carefully. That is not prophetic preaching! No, what is needed is authority! Do you think that John Knox could make Mary, Queen of Scots tremble with some polished little essay?'* The crying need is for preaching to be restored to its pre-eminence again in our churches. Back in 1911 Archibald MacNeilage, editor of the Monthly Record, was bemoaning the backsliding in the Free Church since the stand of 1900:

'The future of the Free Church depends on her being given a Gospel ministry divinely called and divinely commissioned'. This was conceived as far more important than any benefits received from the House of Lords' decision. *'Man-sent messengers ruined the Free Church and the sure token of a divine gracious return will be the appearance among us of a Spirit-baptised ministry'*. *'May a layman appeal to the ministry of the Free Church to magnify their office. The ministers who give their strength to pulpit preparation and pulpit ministration are the ministers who live in the memories of men and the ministers whose work has a measure of permanency in the lives of men!'*

In the same year Principal J D McCulloch in his address at the opening of the Free Church College spoke on *'The Church and Social Work'* and said *'the social reform which was then being emphasised in so many churches as the best means of elevating the masses was no substitute at all for the preaching whereby man himself is changed'*.

History is repeating itself. The pulpit is giving way to the lectern and the overhead. There has been a dumping down of preaching. The minister as the preacher of the Word is disappearing. There is the 'preaching team', with men (who may not have signed the Formula), youth workers and administrators. There is the desire to make ministerial training more academic but Colleges are not producing preachers. David Wells says: *'If the spirit of Puritanism was best represented graphically by a preacher in an elevated pulpit, the arm raised in vigorous punctuation upon the truth of God, that of modern evangelicalism is probably best represented today by the ubiquitous happy face, a bright smile beckoning a smile in return. It wishes not to appear disagreeable'*. Baxter put it in this way: *'All churches either rise or fall as the ministry doth rise or fall (not in riches or worldly grandeur) but in knowledge, zeal and ability for their work'*.

6. Where is your spirit of repentance?

There are very few in our land who seem to want to discover what lies at the heart of the problem in the church. The real problem is the frown of God. God has departed from us. His Holy Spirit is withdrawn. Away back in the 1950s Iain Murray summed up the situation;

'Our witness was simple, but we were convinced it was true and urgent, so we spoke plainly: the ills of our land and the spiritual poverty of the church arose from the fact that we have offended God and that He has a controversy with us. Our problem is not in empty churches nor in indifferent multitudes but in our own disobedience to the Word of God. We have diluted the gospel by turning it into a man-centred message and we have ceased to make the Scripture the rule of all our practice. In short before everything else, we need to

clear out of our lives and out of our pulpits and out of our churches all the things that have caused God to depart from us'.

There has to be a change of mood. We must discover where the problem lies. Let us humble ourselves before God. Knox reasoned thus: *'In our God there is strength to resist and confound multitudes ... but when we join hands with idolatry, it is no doubt that God's amiable presence and comfortable defence leaveth us, and what shall become of us? Put away the idolatry. Let us come to an end of trusting in man and the arm of the flesh. Cease from man'.* Prof John Murray asks: *'What is the strength of the church of God? History has demonstrated how ineffective the church becomes when it relies upon its own resources of wisdom and power. The strength of the church is in the realisation of its own impotence'.* We need a recovery of the manifestation of the glory of God in His church. John Owen said: *'I believe truly that when God has accomplished some end upon us and has stained the glory of all flesh, He will renew the power and glory of religion among us again, even in this nation'.*

7. Where is your unity in the truth?

Knox would deplore the proliferation of Presbyterian Churches in Scotland today. We are one of the many and we must plead a measure of guilt. We are regarded as schismatics. We identify with the words of Acts 28:22: *'We know that everywhere it is spoken against'.* We are considered to be irrelevant. Yet let me dare say that in our testimony lies the secret of the uniting of the Reformed Church in Scotland. We can be united around concern for the glory of God and the restoration of the true Reformed church of God as it was envisaged by Knox and as it flowered in the 1640s. Some are calling the church to move forward and inviting others to join them. The desire is to be contemporary and to be accepted. History will show that there was an unhealthy change in the Free Church in the 1980s and 1990s. We are calling the church to move back, to re-discover its roots. It has been said that *'To destroy a people you must first sever their roots'.* The Reformers moved back to Augustine and Paul to restore the true church in their day. We must rediscover the eternal truth which is always relevant and always contemporary.

What can we do to reverse the trend? We are a remnant but if God is with us who knows but we will yet see a turn of the tide? David Wells speaks of the stream of historic orthodoxy that is now dammed up with worldliness. Let us unblock that stream. Through Luther God kindled that fire which all the world shall not be able to quench. Knox had that fire and it can burn again in our hearts and ministries. We are not here to praise John Knox so much as to exalt the God of John Knox. As Dr Lloyd-Jones cried in 1960, *'Where is the God of John Knox?'* We re-iterate that cry today. Honour me, Knox would say, by honouring my God. Where is the God of John Knox? How we need that God to come in a mighty revival as he did at the Reformation. Says Doug McLachlan: *'The concern for revival, its central burden and most impassioned possession is the restoration of God's name to the exalted position which it deserves in our lives and culture. In revival there is no room for self-centred motivation, only hunger for divine exaltation'.*

John Knox said, *'Whatsoever shall become of us and of our mortal carcasses, I doubt not but that this cause, in despite of Satan, shall prevail in the realm; for as it is the eternal truth of the Eternal God, so shall it once prevail, howsoever for a time it be impugned'.*

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