

John Knox and the Reformation of Worship^[1]

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In the midst of the so-called “worship wars,” many Reformed churches seem to have forgotten their roots. The magisterial Reformers believed that the reformation of worship was the most essential aspect of reforming the church. Without it they understood that Reformed doctrine would never take root in peoples’ lives.

John Knox, for five hundred years since his birth, has been maligned, along with his Reformation colleagues depicted in the statue in Geneva (Calvin, Zwingli, and Farel). At his funeral, Scottish regent James Douglas, fourth Earl of Morton, said, “Here lies one who never feared any flesh.”^[2] Reformation historian Roland Bainton called him “the most implacable of all the Reformers.”^[3] He is justly famous for standing up to Mary Queen of Scots in his effort to establish the Church of Scotland on Reformation principles. He was the most powerful preacher of his age and wrote many, very effective, practical tracts and treatises. What is not fully appreciated is his reformation of worship. Those who do appreciate this aspect of his ministry tend to emphasize his development of the “regulative principle” of worship and his consequent critique of Roman Catholic worship, especially the Mass. However, what he helped put in its place is often overlooked.

I. A BRIEF SKETCH OF KNOX’S LIFE

Early Years [1513-15?–1545]

Sixteenth-century Scotland was “almost beyond the limits of the human race,” according to the Earl of Moray in 1564.^[4] It was very rural in character—the largest city, Edinburgh, had a population of only 15,000. Spiritually it was full of Roman Catholic superstition, and half the wealth was in the hands of the clergy. It was also a pawn of European politics, but by the 1520s trade brought the German Reformation to Scotland.

John Knox was born between 1513–1515 in Gifford near Haddington in East Lothian, fifteen miles east of Edinburgh. His was a hard rural life—his father was probably killed in battle at Knox’s birth. But young John was talented, and thus headed for priesthood. He attended grammar school at Haddington and went on to Saint Andrews University, where Professor John Major exposed him to a critique of clerical excesses. The seeds of the Reformation were being planted in young Knox as the thinking of Erasmus and Jacques Lefèvre d’Etaples came to Saint Andrews via students from University of Paris. Knox also came under the influence of the powerful preaching of Alexander Seton, a former Black Friar. During this time, Patrick Hamilton, who was martyred in 1528, had brought Lutheranism from Wittenberg to Scotland.

Knox was probably ordained in 1536 as priest, likely functioning as a minor church lawyer. Sometime about 1543–45, when Knox was about aged thirty, through his study of Jerome and Augustine, and his hearing Scripture preached by the prior at Greyfriar’s Monastery in Inverness,

Knox was converted to Reformed Christianity. John 17, in particular, taught him the importance of dependence on Christ alone for salvation.

Early Public Ministry: Wishart and St. Andrews [1546–1549]

Knox became a disciple of the fiery Reformed preacher George Wishart, while serving as a tutor to the sons of a Scottish nobleman who denounced popery and the Mass. He served as Wishart's bodyguard, wielding a two-handed sword, during a five-week preaching tour in Lothian. When they encountered danger in Haddington, Knox was about to defend Wishart, who said "gang back to your bairns Maister Knox."^[5] Nine hours later Wishart was arrested and brought to Cardinal Beaton (known to be a drunk and a womanizer) at St Andrews. The next day Wishart was strangled and burned while uttering a gracious prayer: "I beseech thee, Father of heaven, forgive them that have, from ignorance or an evil mind, forged lies of me: I forgive them with all my heart. I beseech Christ to forgive them that have ignorantly condemned me."^[6] This event had a profound effect on Knox.

On May 29, 1546, the castle at St. Andrews was seized by Protestants, who killed Cardinal Beaton. On April 10, 1547, Knox arrived at the castle with group of students from the University for asylum. He taught them letters, humanities, Latin and Greek, and lectured on the Gospel of John. The people pleaded with Knox to preach since their pastor, John Rough, was unlearned. Knox responded, "I won't run where God has not called me."^[7] Rough asked Knox to preach in the presence of the congregation during Sunday worship. Knox fled to his room and wept for fear of martyrdom and the awesome responsibility of preaching. But under duress, he agreed.^[8]

His first sermon, on Daniel 7:24–25, was preached in the presence of the faculty of St. Andrews, including some of his former teachers, such as John Major.^[9] He proved justification by faith and called the pope anti-Christ. He preached with power, causing some to comment, "He strikes at the root."^[10] Knox also administered the first Lord's Supper served in Scotland since the Middle Ages. It was simply observed, and all partook of both elements.^[11]

In June of 1547, the castle was seized by twenty-one French galleys. Knox was condemned as a "heretic" and sentenced to nineteen months at the oars with some of the worst French criminals. When asked to kiss a wooden statue of the Virgin Mary, Knox tossed it overboard with his usual gusto, saying, "She is light enough. Let her swim."^[12] This intense suffering strengthened his spiritual convictions. During this ordeal, he learned to pray the Psalms. Seeing the steeples on the Scottish shore, he longed to return and preach the gospel. Never again did the terrors of life intimidate or treasures of this world allure him.

Ministry in England under Edward VI [1549–1554]

Early in 1549, Knox was freed in France, probably in a prisoner exchange, and returned to the safe haven of England under Edward VI's benevolent reign.^[13] Knox was licensed to preach under this godly king, who supported the Reformation (son of Henry VIII). His congregation was a garrison of six hundred men at Berwick-on-Tweed, a border town in the northeast of England. Many were converted. While there he wrote a moving treatise on prayer published in 1553.^[14]

During this time, Mrs. Elizabeth Bowes, a noble woman from the area, came to hear Knox preach. She was deeply depressed and looking for consolation. She found it in the gospel and in turn became like a mother to Knox. Soon thereafter, he married her daughter Margorie.[\[15\]](#)

Knox's unequivocal preaching against the Mass earned him a summons to account for his position before the Council of the North in Newcastle in April 1550. He ably demonstrated before Bishop of Durham[\[16\]](#)

In 1551, Knox was appointed Chaplain in Ordinary to King Edward VI. His first sermon at court attacked the practice, advocated in the second edition of the Book of Common Prayer (1552), of compulsory kneeling before receiving the Lord's Supper. Presses were stopped to insert a caution that "kneeling" was not worshipping the elements. Knox's preaching drew large crowds. He observed that godly and ailing Edward was surrounded by Ahithophels. Court life sickened him. Knox refused the bishopric of Rochester in Kent.[\[17\]](#)

On July 6, 1553, King Edward died, and Mary Tudor took the throne. Knox warned the church of being shipwrecked on the rocks of Roman Catholic idolatry. He fled north under pursuit and was smuggled to France on a boat from Newcastle.

The Marian Exile [1554–1559]

Having arrived safely in Dieppe, Knox wrestled with the question: "Am I a coward?" Matthew 10:23 was a comfort, "When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next." Eventually arriving as an exile in Geneva, Knox declared it to be "the most perfect school of Christ that ever was since the days of the apostles."[\[18\]](#) Soon after Knox arrived, Calvin sent him to Bullinger in Zurich to receive counsel on the "divine right of kings" and the right to redress grievances. Meanwhile, French Mary of Guise seized the Scottish throne.

After a brief return to Geneva, Knox received a call to become the pastor to the English exiles in Frankfurt in 1555. He arrived only to encounter worship wars instigated by Dr. Richard Cox, dean of Westminster, who demanded uniformity according to the Book of Common Prayer. Knox, on the other hand, was willing to compromise between Book of Common Prayer and Genevan Service Book. Sadly, the Frankfurt congregation was divided, and Knox was forced to resign. He returned to Geneva in November 1555, where he found a new congregation of English exiles. There Knox gave himself to study and helped translate the Geneva Bible, especially the marginal notes.[\[19\]](#) Several months later, part of the Frankfurt congregation, along with William Whittingham, came to Knox in Geneva.

In late 1555, Mrs. Bowes and Knox's wife Marjorie pleaded with Knox to come and rescue them from the tyranny of the reign of Bloody Mary. Upon his secret return, Knox found a new hunger for the gospel in Edinburgh and Scotland, where Reformed Christians were sheltered by the Protestant nobility under the leadership of the Duke of Argyle. Knox returned to Geneva with Mrs. Bowes and Marjorie.[\[20\]](#)

The English exiles in Geneva asked Knox to be their pastor (along with Christopher Goodman). During his ministry (1556–1558), Knox grew as a minister and Reformer. He developed his own order of worship, Reformed Church Order, known as the “Geneva Book.”[\[21\]](#)

Then in 1558, he received a letter from four Scottish noblemen requesting his return. Three months later, he resigned and set out alone for Scotland. He was stopped at Dieppe after hearing news of persecution and the return of northern England to Rome. Knox preached to the Huguenots in La Rochelle and then returned to Geneva dejected, and gave up on the possibility of the Reformation of Scotland.

Back in Geneva, he wrote *The First Blast of the Trumpet against that Monstrous Regiment of Women* against Bloody Mary (Tudor) for her burning of martyrs in England. At this time, Mary of Guise ruled Scotland from France, with her daughter, Mary Queen of Scots, crowned at age sixteen. Knox overstated his case and offended Queen Elizabeth. Christopher Goodman wrote a treatise *How Superior Powers Ought to Be Observed*. Both were published in Geneva and embarrassed Calvin and Beza.[\[22\]](#)

Ministry in Scotland: Scottish Reformation [1559–1572]

Finally, in November 1558, Mary Tudor died. Knox left Geneva, as honorary burgess, in the spring of 1559. Traveling via Dieppe, Knox arrived at the port of Leith in Edinburgh on May 2, 1559. “John Knox is come!” rang throughout Scotland. He arrived in the midst of a meeting of bishops and priests on the subject of the reform of the church.[\[23\]](#) The Queen Regent decreed a meeting of the pastors at Stirling on May 10. Protestants and their army went along. She then called it off. Knox preached for forty days under threat of being shot. Meanwhile, fourteen priests were converted at St Andrews. The Queen then attacked and killed of the Protestants from Leith, forcing the Protestants to retreat to Stirling. There Knox preached on Psalm 80, “Take a stand for God’s eternal truth,” stirring up his followers to stand against the Queen Regent. Eventually English troops were sent, and the French forces withdrew.

Then the Scottish Parliament convened, rejecting the authority of the pope and declaring the Mass illegal. The National Covenant, Confession, and Book of Discipline were approved with astonishing speed. From then on, Knox preached regularly at St. Giles Church in Edinburgh.

From 1561–1572, the Counter-Reformation in Europe took aim at Scotland, hoping it to be the easiest to overturn. In 1561, Mary Queen of Scots (Mary Guise’s daughter) returned from France and held a Mass in her royal chapel. She was a subtle, sly, beautiful, and deceptive flatterer. But Knox was not afraid to denounce her. She summoned him, and a famous debate ensued. Mary insisted, “You must obey the prince, therefore his religion.” Knox retorted, “Religion gets its authority from God, not the prince.” Mary responded, “May subjects resist the prince?” Knox answered, “Yes, when princes ‘exceed their bounds.’” Mary stood amazed for fifteen minutes, and then responded, “Then princes should obey you and the people?” Knox insisted, “No, both prince and his subjects must obey God. May you be blessed like Deborah.” She wept once, not out of hurt or sorrow, but out of petulant stubbornness. Knox was not rude and uncouth as he is often depicted. He was plain, and to the point, but always courteous.

Mary was unfaithful to her second husband and plotted his murder. She abdicated her throne and was beheaded for treason by Elizabeth in July of 1567. The Earl of Moray ruled, known as “the good regent,” until he was assassinated. Then James VI began his reign.

Meanwhile, Knox was shot at in his house in Edinburgh. The bullet hit a chandelier. Thus, Knox was urged to retire to St Andrews. His wife, Marjorie, had died in 1564. He was remarried. Knox was deeply affected by the St. Bartholomew Massacre in France in 1572. He died November 24, 1572. He put up his sword and went to be with his Lord.[\[24\]](#) Truly he was the “trumpeter of God.”[\[25\]](#)

II. KNOX’S REFORMATION OF WORSHIP

“The Scottish Reformation was preeminently a struggle over worship.”[\[26\]](#)

What Knox Learned in Scotland and Geneva

In 1549 at Berwick-on-Tweed, Knox wrote a treatise, “Declaration of the Christian Belief in the Lord’s Supper.” It was published in 1550. His first sermon as chaplain to King Edward VI, as we have seen, attacked the practice, advocated in the second edition of the Book of Common Prayer, of compulsory kneeling before receiving the Lord’s Supper. During the worship conflict in Frankfurt, in which Cox advocated submission to this practice, a revised version of Calvin’s *Forme des Prières* (Form of Prayers), with William Wittingham’s help (along with Anthony Gilby, John Foxe, and Thomas Cole), became the Form of Prayers or Genevan Service Book for the English Genevan congregation that was published in early 1556.

Knox learned from Calvin to think through the form of worship so as not to add elements which were the inventions of men, such as required kneeling at the Lord’s Supper. He also used Valerian Poullain’s *Liturgia Sacra* (Poullain was Calvin’s successor in Strassburg). He translated one of the confessions of sin, and composed his own Eucharistic prayer.[\[27\]](#)

What Knox Learned in Geneva and Scotland

The Genevan Service Book or Book of Geneva became the Service Book of the Church of Scotland. Here is the Sunday Morning Service or liturgy from Genevan Service Book 1556. This is considered the first Puritan prayer book:

A Confession of sins
A Prayer for pardon
A metrical Psalm
A Prayer for illumination
The Scripture Lection and Sermon
The Long Prayer and the Lord’s Prayer
The Apostles’ Creed (*said by the minister alone*)
A metrical Psalm
A Blessing (*either 1 Corinthians or Numbers*)
The Lord’s Supper

A Psalm in metre while the elements were prepared
The Words of Institution
The Exhortation
Sursum corda
The Consecration
The Fraction and Delivery
The Communion while Scripture is read
The Post-Communion Prayer
Psalm 103
Gloria in excelsis
The Blessing[28]

The Foundation of the Regulative Principle

The Regulative Principle was forged in Frankfurt with roots in Geneva. The preface to the Form of Prayer, known as the Book of Geneva, gives the first known statement of the Regulative Principle. The author was William Whittingham, who brought this principle back to England. This became a hallmark of English Puritanism.

Because there is no way more ready or sure to come to him, than by framing ourselves altogether to his blessed will, revealed unto us in his Word ... a form and order of a reformed church, limited within the compass of God's Word.[29]

In his first sermon at St. Andrews, in answer to the subprior's questions about adding ceremonies, Knox said: "Now, if ye will prove that your ceremonies proceed from faith, and do please God, ye must prove God in expressed words has commanded them." [30] It should be remembered that the Regulative Principle was limited to church government and worship. The New Testament was the standard, though principles were gleaned from the Old.

The Forms of Worship: Liturgy in the Reformed Tradition

Historian Horton Davies observed that the Genevan liturgy was "biblical, didactic, and congregational." [31] One of the great discoveries of the Reformation was that Reformed public worship gives practical form to Reformed doctrine, and thus practical form to the Christian life. In turn every aspect of worship is informed by the Word of God. Each element must be warranted by the Word. Even the exact order of worship must have biblical logic, although the particular order is not expressly warranted, and thus was understood to be somewhat flexible. Calvin counseled compromise where liturgical elements do not effect the substance of faith, and encouraged pastoral patience in seeking reform.

III. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE REFORMATION OF OUR WORSHIP

We Should Glean from Our Liturgical Roots

After becoming Reformed in doctrine, I was amazed to discover the richness of the Reformed theology and practice of worship—something that did not seem important to those who

originally convinced me of the Reformed faith. This is still a largely untapped source in the life of our churches. *Ad fonts*, “to the fountains or sources,” was a cry of the Reformation.

Perhaps the dominance of technology, novelty, and the forms of popular culture have inhibited the use of our liturgical past in forming our present orders of worship. When we minimize the importance of forms of all kinds we are missing the inextricable relationship between form and substance. Forms are never merely a matter of style, as conventional wisdom would have us think. For example the formal attire at most weddings is an expression of the importance of the occasion. The particular ways that we do things are the expression of the things themselves.

Also, what we do not do is as important as what we do. So, when Knox objected to kneeling at the Lord’s Table, he was objecting to adding an element not expressly required in the New Testament. So the absence of corporate confession of sin, assurance of pardon, and confession of faith using the historic creeds says something about our priorities as officers in charge of worship.

We Should Not Ignore or Shun Liturgical Forms of Worship

It would be useful to ask if the Westminster Directory’s, and thus our own (OPC), lack of liturgical forms is necessarily a good thing. Was the Puritan position something of a reaction to the Anglican imposition of a prayer book? Or was there practice removed from the official governing documents of the church for good reason?

The magisterial Reformers, as well as the Presbyterian Puritans, like Calvin and Knox, Wittingham, etc., did not oppose liturgical forms or written prayers *per se*, but only their imposition on ministers and churches. The Westminster Assembly used both prescribed and extemporaneous prayers. The Independents (Congregationalists) were the ones who promoted extemporaneous prayers exclusively.

In Scotland, especially in the South and West, there was considerable anti-liturgical sentiment. As James Hastings Nichols observes:

As we turn to the [Westminster] Directory for Worship, the first striking fact about the document is that it is not a liturgy or service book at all, after the fashion of Calvin, Cranmer, or Knox. [\[32\]](#)

Would we do well to consider “suggested forms of worship” as our Reformed forefathers did? We do so for funerals, weddings, and the sacraments. Calvin, Cranmer, and Knox each used service books with liturgies.

We must assess how the electronic media environment is affecting our understanding of and practice of worship and fostering formless worship

Our entire attitude toward worship is shaped by our culture, which idolizes the visual image over against the written and spoken word, the novel against the traditional, the entertaining against the serious, the popular against the classical, the immediate against the eternal, the informal against the formal.

Since every medium is an inherent part of the message it communicates, the elements of worship should not be “supplemented” with the chief purveyors of modern culture—electronic media. They subtly bring their own messages into worship, often eclipsing the gospel; muting the reverence and awe that should be the atmosphere and attitude of worship; and truncating the full range of biblical truth, in particular the place of lament and grief.[\[33\]](#)

We Should Consider the Reading and Preaching of Scripture as the Supreme Act of Worship

Preaching is often wrongly distinguished from worship, as if preaching is something different from worship, and that worship consists of praise and prayer. But if we are to regain a proper understanding of preaching as the supreme act of worship, then we should consider three ingredients that are essential to preaching, and should thus be always in the forefront of our thinking and practice.[\[34\]](#)

First, preaching must be spiritually powerful. Near the end of his life, in a condition so weakened that he could barely climb into the pulpit of Saint Andrews, it is said by one observer that

before he [Knox] was done with his sermon he was so active and vigorous that he was like to ding the pulpit in blads [pieces], and fly out of it... he maid me sa to grew [quake] and tremble, that I could not hald pen to wryt.”[\[35\]](#)

Second, preaching must be seen as the center of true worship. As covenantal communication, preaching is the supreme act of worship, then should this not be reflected in the order of worship? The liturgies of the Reformation placed the ministry of the Word at the center, rather than the end, of the liturgy, with an approach to the Lord, declaring the gospel, at the beginning, and a response to the Word, including a confession of faith, a pastoral prayer, and the Lord’s Supper, at the end.

Third, preaching must be understood as God speaking. John Calvin’s own view of the centrality of preaching is reflected in the Ecclesiastical Ordinances, which were framed under his influence:

The first part of the office of the pastor, says the Ordinances, is “to proclaim the Word of God, to instruct, admonish, exhort and censure, both in public and in private.” ... Calvin will very frequently use the most definite language to assert that the preaching of the gospel is the Word of God. It is as if the congregation “heard the very words pronounced by God himself.” A man “preaches so that God may speak to us by the mouth of a man.”[\[36\]](#)

Despite having a naturally reserved personality, he exercised rare freedom in the pulpit. “His manner of delivery was lively, passionate, intimate, direct, and clear.”[\[37\]](#) For Calvin, the sermon itself was an act of worship as it engaged the congregation in the reality of redemption.[\[38\]](#)

As we reflect on the life and ministry of John Knox, on the occasion of the five hundredth anniversary of his birth, especially his reformation of worship, may the Lord give us grace and wisdom to continue that noble reforming effort.

Endnotes

[1] This article is adapted from a Reformation Day lecture given at Amoskeag Presbyterian Church, October 29, 2004.

[2] W. Stanford Reid, *Trumpeter of God: A Biography of John Knox* (New York: Scribner's, 1974), 283. Quoting from D. Calderwood, *The History of the Kirk of Scotland, vol. 3*, ed. T. Thompson (Edinburgh: Wodrow Soc., 1842), 242.

[3] Roland H. Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (Boston: Beacon, 1952), 180.

[4] Iain Tait, "The Exiled Reformers of Sixteenth-Century Geneva," printed lectures given at Covenant College, Lookout Mountain, TN, September 17–21, 1973, page 1 of Lecture I. Much of this brief history is based on these largely unpaginated lectures.

[5] Reid, *Trumpeter of God*, 29–30.

[6] *Ibid.*, 30. Cf. John Fox, *The Second Volume of the Ecclesiastical History: Containing the Acts and Monuments of Martyrs: with a General Discourse of the Later Persecutions Horrible Troubles and Tumults Stirred up by Romish Prelates in the Church: with Diverse Other Things Incident to this Realm of Scotland and England* (London: The Company of Stationers, 1684), 526.

[7] Reid, *Trumpeter of God*, 47.

[8] Elizabeth Whitley, *The Plain Mr. Knox* (Edinburgh: The Scottish Reformation Society, 1960), 30–31.

[9] Reid, *Trumpeter of God*, 48.

[10] Whitley, *The Plain Mr. Knox*, 32.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] *Ibid.*, 36.

[13] D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 261.

[14] Whitley, *The Plain Mr. Knox*, 44–45.

[15] *Ibid.*, 46–47; Tait, "The Exiled Reformers," Lecture III, 8.

[16] Ibid., Tait.

[17] Ibid., 9.

[18] Thomas M'Crie, *The Life of John Knox* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1845), 129.

[19] Whitley, *The Plain Mr. Knox*, 85.

[20] Tait, "The Exiled Reformers," Lecture III, 12.

[21] Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans*, 275.

[22] Tait, "The Exiled Reformers," Lecture III, 15–16.

[23] Ibid., 16.

[24] Ibid., 17–21.

[25] Reid, *Trumpeter of God*, 284.

[26] Kevin Reed, "Knox and the Reformation of Worship in the Scottish Reformation," in *Worship in the Presence of God*, ed. Frank J. Smith and David C. Lachman (Greenville, SC: Greenville Seminary Press, 1992), 332.

[27] Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: Guides to the Reformed Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1984), 139–40.

[28] Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans* (Glasgow: Dacre, 1948; repr., Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), 31 (modern edition).

[29] Iain H. Murray, ed., *The Reformation of the Church. A Collection of Reformed and Puritan Documents on Church Issues* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 75.

[30] Kevin Reed, "Knox and the Reformation of Worship," 296.

[31] Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 119.

[32] James Hastings Nichols, *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 99.

[33] See Gregory Edward Reynolds, *The Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures, Preaching in the Electronic Age* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), especially chapter 8.

[34] Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, 1:7.

[\[35\]](#) Reid, *Trumpeter of God*, 270.

[\[36\]](#) T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin* (Tring/Batavia, IL/Sydney: Lion, 1987), 106.

[\[37\]](#) *Ibid.*, 110.

[\[38\]](#) *Ibid.*, 114.

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[Return to Formatted Page](#)

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