

John Knox (1514-1572)

John Knox is thought of as the leader of the Scottish Reformation and the person who established Presbyterian church government in Scotland, from which most "Presbyterian churches" in the world descend.

He was a priest, a Christian, a galley slave, an exile, a preacher and a reformer.

Scotland

Scotland was controlled by Mary of Guise, the French wife of the late King. The country was solidly Roman Catholic. The Reformation had begun with the translation of the Bible into common languages in England and Europe.

In 1517 Martin Luther published his "95 Theses", i.e. points of disagreement with the Roman Church.

George Wishart, an early Scottish reformer, was executed in 1546.

Knox's Life

Knox was born in Haddington, East Lothian in 1514.

He was educated at St Andrew's and worked for a period as a priest. He came under the influence of George Wishart who was later executed for his protestant teaching.

Knox was involved in the movement for reform in the church of Scotland which was under the control of Cardinal Beaton and Queen Mary of Guise.

Knox was involved in the siege of St. Andrew's, and was imprisoned in 1547 when the siege was broken up by a French fleet. He was subsequently sentenced to serve as a French galley slave, but escaped after 19 months.

Following his escape in 1549 he preached for a time in England and was a chaplain to King Edward VI, a Christian king who desired to reform the Church of England. But after the king's death, Knox was forced to flee to Geneva to escape the malicious designs of Queen Mary Tudor (reigned 1553-58) who had re-established Roman Catholicism in England.

At Geneva, in Switzerland, John Knox came into contact with the French Reformer, John Calvin, and he gained knowledge and experience of the Reformed faith which was later adopted by the Church of Scotland. In 1559 Knox was invited by some Scottish nobles to return to Scotland and lead the work of reforming the church in line with Scripture. This movement led to the removal of French political influence in Scotland.

The Scots Confession, 1560

John Knox was involved in writing the new Confession of Faith, "The Scots Confession" (written in four days!) and the Book of Discipline and the Book of Common Order. These codified the faith, the worship and the government of the newly reformed Church or "Kirk".

A confession of faith sets forth certain articles of belief which are regarded as necessary for salvation and for the well-being of the Church; it may cover the whole system of Christian doctrine, (as the Scots Confession or the Westminster Confession of Faith), or it may be a brief outline of the most important beliefs (as the Apostles' and the Nicene Creeds).

The Scots Confession set out what the Scottish Church believed Scripture taught. It was seen as a means of unity for Christians who agree on the same things.

The Confession pledged commitment to God Father Son and Holy Spirit. Acknowledging that God is active in creation, the confession traced the origin of the Church back to God in Eden, and the authority of the Church from Christ (and not from the Roman Catholic Pope).

The Confession sets forth three marks of the true and faithful Church:

1. The true preaching of the Word of God.
2. The right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus (baptism and communion).
3. Church discipline, by which sin is repressed and righteousness nourished.

The Confession was a call to action to defend the truth of the Bible in difficult times, trusting in God who had helped them so far when the Reformation in other countries faced cruel opposition. As a call to action in a turbulent time, the Scots Confession reflects a spirit of trust and a commitment to the God whose miraculous deliverance the Scots had experienced firsthand.

Knox served as the leader of the reformed group throughout the reign of Mary “Queen of Scots”. In many interviews with the Roman Catholic Queen Mary, he criticised her for supporting Roman Catholic practices. Queen Mary was removed after her involvement with her husband’s murder and her son James VI was enthroned.

The Covenant

The reformation of the Church of Scotland was established with a covenant.

A covenant in Scripture is a solemn bond of loyalty or solemn agreement. The Reformers followed the Biblical example of Joshua and Josiah and Nehemiah. In swearing a covenant they were not binding themselves to anything additional to the Bible, but that they were additionally binding themselves to what was already their duty to do.

God had prepared the people of Scotland for reform, and within a year the general population accepted the prominent teachings of the Reformation. The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and the Scottish Parliament agreed in 1560 that the Church should become a Reformed Church.

Difficulties still followed. Knox understood that the Reformed Church under Christ and governed by elders (Presbyterianism) was an institution independent of the State. However King James VI wanted a Church subject to the State, governed by bishops (Episcopacy).

Presbyterian

The term “Presbyterian” comes from the Greek word for “elder”. Each congregation is governed by a plurality of elders, who collectively are called the “Session”. These are men, chosen by the people and with no distinction of rank.

Each Session sends delegates to the regular meetings of Presbytery, a higher court of the Church.

Presbyteries, in turn, meet together in a general gathering, or Synod.

Knox died 24 November 1572 and he is considered the founder of the Presbyterian denominations whose members number millions worldwide.