

# John Knox: Scottish Reformer

John Knox was born to William Knox and his wife, whose name is unknown, sometime between 1505 and 1514. Though very little is known about Knox's early life, it is known that he was born on Giffordgate St in the town of Haddington, Scotland. Knox had a brother--William. Their parents died when the boys were quite young and presumably relatives took them in. By the time Knox was 10 it was decided that he would be a priest and at 15, after grammar school, he left home for St. Andrew's to attend St. Salvator's College.

It is quite likely that John Knox studies theology with John Major (Mair), who graduated from Cambridge and Paris. He was a much admired Provost at Sorbonne. Major was also a well known philosopher and one of the greatest scholars of that time.

Though Knox's graduation is inevitable, there is no record of it. But when he left the university he became a priest and was from then on known as "Mr. Knox", acknowledging that he had a degree. He did not, however, acquire a parish due to the fact that there were too many priests for the number of parishes. What he did in the 1530's after graduating is not known, but by 1540 Knox had become a country lawyer in East Lothian.

In December of 1540, on the thirteenth, John Knox finally appears in records at Haddington Market Cross on behalf of James Ker. In 1543, He was acting as a tutor for a boy named William Brounfield and may have even been a tutor to Ker's own sons, seeing that he was living with the Ker's.

It is unknown when Knox abandoned law to teach, but we do know that it was because he had become a Protestant, possibly under the influence of George Wishart. Wishart travelled all over Scotland preaching in favor of the reformation. When he came to East Lothian, Knox became one of his closest associates and soon his bodyguard until Wishart was martyred in March of 1546. Knox escaped because of Wishart's advise to return to tutoring.

John Knox began to tutor the sons of Longniddry and Cockburn. After Cardinal Beaton was murdered in his house, the assassins took hold of the castle and about one hundred fifty of their friends and family took refuge in it. Longniddry and Cockburn suggested that Knox also go and take their sons with him to continue to tutor them in the reformed doctrine. They arrived at the castle on April 10, 1547.

John Rough, chaplain of the garrison at the castle, took note of John Knox's abilities as a preacher. When preaching in the parish church on the Protestant principle on the election of a pastor, Rough proposed John Knox for that office to the congregation. Knox was horrified at the idea and according to his own records, fled to his room weeping. The next week, though, he was preaching his first sermon, not only to an ordinary congregation, but also to his old teacher, John Major. He preached on the seventh chapter of Daniel, comparing the pope to the antichrist. What was so neat about this sermon is his consideration of the Bible as his sole authority and the doctrine of justification by faith alone. These two elements remained with him for the rest of his life. Just a few days after this sermon, there came up a debate that allowed for Knox to state additional theses, including the rejection of Mass, Purgatory, and prayers for the dead.

On June 29, 1547, 21 galley ships came to St. Andrews and besieged the castle. Their surrender was forced on the 21st of July. Knox, along with other Scottish nobles were taken prisoner and forced to row the galley ship. They were chained to benches where they were made to row all day without any change in their posture and watched by an officer who held a whip. Torture was a threat if they refused to show the proper signs of reverence at mass. Knox tells of a time when a Scot, maybe even himself, seeing how he often recounted personal anecdotes in the third-person, was commanded to show devotion to the Virgin Mary. When this particular prisoner was told to give it a kiss of veneration, he took hold of the picture, throwing it into the sea, saying, "Let our Lady now save herself: she is light enough: let her learn to swim." After this incident the Scottish prisoners were no longer forced to perform such devotions.

When--in summer of 1548, about a year after they were taken prisoners--the galley went back to Scotland to scout for English ships, Knox was quite ill with a fever. So much so that his friends feared for his life. This was the lowest point in his health. But even then, he recalls, his mind stayed alert and he was constantly comforting his fellow prisoners with hope of release. When the ships were lying off shore between St. Andrews and Dundee, the spires of the parish church where Knox had first preached could be sighted. A fellow prisoner, James Balfour, inquired of Knox whether or not he recognized the landmark. Knox, after replying that he knew it all too well, stated that he would not die until he preached there again.

John Knox spent a total of 19 months in the galley-prison. But in February of 1549 Knox was released. It is not known how he obtained his liberty, but that is not important. What is important is that Knox was finally free.

As soon as he was released, John Knox took refuge in England. He got his license to work in the Church of England on April 7, 1549. Berwick-upon-Tweed was his first commission. Being obliged to use the recently released *Book of Common Prayer*, he modified its use along Protestant lines. As his congregation grew, he preached the Protestant doctrines with great effect.

It was in England where Knox met his wife, Margery Bowes. She died in 1560. Her father, Richard Bowes, and brother, Robert, were opposed to the marriage, though Knox tried to obtain their permission. Knox did, however, have a close relationship with Margery's mother. It is not recorded when they were married.

As the end of 1550 was near, John Knox was appointed as a preacher of St. Nicholas' Church in Newcastle upon Tyre and the following year he was made one of the six royal chaplains that served the king. When King Edward died on July 6, 1553, Mary Tudor was made his successor. she re-established Roman Catholicism in England, so Knox was forced to leave for the Geneva in January of 1554.

Some time after he arrived, John Knox was made minister of a new place of worship, petitioned from Calvin. While this was happening, Elizabeth Bowes was writing to him begging him to return to Scotland to his wife, Margery. He did so at the end of August 1555, but did not stay long. He felt it was his duty to go back to Geneva because the congregation there had elected him as their minister. He returned in September of the following year.

Knox was kept quite busy in Geneva. Preaching three sermons a week, each one lasting well over two hours, was completely normal for John Knox. It was here where his first

two children were born--Nathaniel and Eleazar. In the summer of 1558 Knox published probably his most well-known pamphlet, *The first blast of the trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women*. Knox states his purpose for it was to demonstrate "how abominable before God is the Empire or Rule of a wicked woman, yea, of a traiteresse and bastard". The women rulers Knox was referring to were Queen Mary I of England and Mary of Guise on behalf of her daughter Mary, Queen of Scots. Though prejudices like Knox's against women were not uncommon, it was still very dangerous to so publicly state it. When Elizabeth Tudor became queen of England the English refugees in Geneva left for home and at the same time Knox decided that it was time for him to go home as well--to Scotland. He arrived in May of 1559. In December of 1560, his wife died, leaving him to care for their two sons, who were three and one half and two years old.

On March 26 of 1564 John Knox married Margaret Stewart, not only the daughter of an old friend, but more importantly a distant relative of Mary, Queen of Scots. This marriage was pretty unusual as the bride was only seventeen and he, a widower of fifty. She gave him three girls: Martha, Margaret, and Elizabeth.

As John Knox was dying on November 24, 1572, his young wife was reading to him from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. He was buried in the churchyard at St. Giles'.

It is not so much for overthrowing Roman Catholicism that John Knox, but much more for being the founder of Presbyterianism. There are millions of Presbyterians worldwide today.