

THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN  
LESSON TWO  
“JOHN KNOX AND SCOTTISH PRESBYTERIANISM”  
REV. DR. GLEN J. CLARY

1. The European Roots of American Presbyterianism

- Before Hart and Muether describe the founding of the American presbyterian church, they direct our attention to its European roots.
- In the section entitled “The Ordeal of Scottish Presbyterianism” (pp. 15–20),
  - they trace the rise of presbyterianism in Scotland and Northern Ireland from the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century to the so-called “Glorious Revolution” under the reign of William and Mary in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century
  - Why Scotland and Northern Ireland?
    - Because these were the two strongholds for presbyterianism in Europe, and the presbyterian immigrants to America were Scottish or Scotch-Irish
- Though the focus of this class is on the American presbyterian church and not on presbyterianism in Europe,
  - We need to spend a little time looking at the European roots of American presbyterianism in order to understand the historical and theological background that shaped the American presbyterian church
  - So that’s what I want to do today: briefly survey the historical and theological background of presbyterianism in Europe in order to understand the roots of the American presbyterian church

- We are going to look especially at the ministry of John Knox and the founding of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. This will take us back to the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Knox is the father of Scottish Presbyterianism.
- And then, we will look at the Westminster Assembly, which met in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century during the English Civil War, sometimes called the Wars of Three Kingdoms (England, Scotland, Ireland). Samuel Gardiner called it “the Puritan revolution”

## 2. John Knox and the Founding of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland

- It’s hard to introduce John Knox without mentioning another minister by the name of George Wishart because it was through Wishart’s preaching that Knox became a supporter of Protestantism
- Wishart was a native of Scotland but he left and travelled to Switzerland where he came under the influence of the Swiss Reformers, particularly those who were associated with Ulrich Zwingli, the leading Reformer of Zurich, Switzerland
- Wishart returned to Scotland in 1543 and started promoting the Reformation by an extensive preaching tour in various cities and villages
- He preached to packed congregations in parish churches, but on occasion, when the local authorities prohibited him from preaching in the churches, he preached to crowds at open-air meetings in the fields nearby
- In 1545, Knox heard him preach and was so moved by it that he joined the little band of friends and admirers who guarded Wishart as he travelled from one safe house to the next.
- Knox took on the role of Wishart’s bodyguard, as it were, and he often carried a large sword to frighten off Wishart’s enemies.
  - The image of Knox carrying a sword and leading the travelling band of Reformers has made an indelible impression on Knox’s reputation. He was a fearless Reformer ... like the prophet Samuel or Elijah. The thundering Scot!
  - At his burial, the Earl of Morton said of Knox, “Here lies one who never feared any flesh.”

- Despite having an armed escort, Wishart was soon arrested and brought to St. Andrews Castle, where he was executed as a heretic on 1 March 1546.
  - Knox would have been martyred too if Wishart had not compelled him to flee for his own safety.
- His supporters were outraged by his death. Some of them even vowed vengeance on the Cardinal who presided over the church court that condemned and executed him, Cardinal David Beaton. Within two months later, the Cardinal was killed.
- In May of 1546, a group of sixteen men gathered before sunrise in the priory churchyard near St. Andrews Castle, where the Cardinal resided.
  - The men stormed the castle and forced their way into Beaton's chamber, where they found the terrified Cardinal crying out, "I am a priest! I am a priest! You shall not slay me!"
  - But one of the men shouted, "Repent thee of thy former wicked life, especially of the shedding of the blood of that notable instrument of God, Master George Wishart, which, albeit the flame of fire consumed before men, yet cries it a vengeance upon thee; and we from God are sent to revenge it."
  - Then they killed him with a sword and displayed his mutilated corpse by hanging it from a window at St. Andrews Castle
- The men who slew Cardinal Beaton barricaded themselves inside the castle walls and waited in vain for the English military to come to their aid.
  - These men became known as the "Castilians." Other revolutionaries gradually joined them inside the castle, and their number grew to more than 120 men, among whom was John Rough, who became their chaplain.
- Immediately after Easter in 1547, John Knox, together with three young pupils under his care, also sought refuge inside the castle walls. Knox was a priest but had only worked as a tutor and papal notary
  - When John Rough heard Knox lecturing his students on the Fourth Gospel, he was so impressed with his teaching that he urged him to take up the public ministry of the Word.

- Knox refused to do so without a proper call. He was finally persuaded, however, when John Rough boldly charged him from the pulpit:
  - In the name of God, and of His Son Jesus Christ, and in the name of these that presently call you by my mouth, I charge you, that ye refuse not this holy vocation, but . . . that ye take upon you the public office of preaching, even as ye look to avoid God's heavy displeasure, and desire that He shall multiply His graces upon you.
- Knox burst into tears, left the meeting and sequestered himself in his room for several days before he finally accepted the call.
- When he finally stepped into the pulpit at the end of April 1547, he preached his first sermon on the seventh chapter of Daniel.
  - Knox argued that the last beast of Daniel's vision represents the Roman Catholic Church because it "had arisen out of the ruins of the Roman Empire."
  - So the Roman Church is none other than the Man of Sin, the Antichrist, and the Whore of Babylon.
  - His denunciation of the Roman Church was so vehement that his listeners could be heard saying, "Others cut the branches of the Papistry, but he strikes at the root, to destroy the whole."
- Knox was thirty-two years of age when he commenced his preaching ministry. From that day forward, he considered preaching his chief calling.
  - Knox "was most at home in the pulpit, where he saw himself as God's mouthpiece and he described his preaching as 'blowing the trumpet'" (Mason, 20).
  - The effect of his preaching was profound. One contemporary described it as follows: "His voice, thundering from the pulpit, was able, in one hour, to put more life in us than 500 trumpets continually blustering in our ears" (idem.).
- Knox's first blast of the trumpet stirred up a hornets' nest within the Roman clergy.

- The Vicar-General of the diocese of St. Andrews (John Winram) received a letter from Archbishop Hamilton, reproving him for allowing “such heretical and schismatical doctrine to be taught” without opposition.
- Winram was sympathetic to Protestantism and later became a Reformer, but he needed to tactfully get Knox out of the pulpit, so he “arranged for every learned man in the priory and University to preach in the parish church on Sundays, so that there was no vacant Sunday” on which the Reformer could preach (idem.).
- Knox, however, was permitted to preach on weekdays, which afforded him the opportunity of commenting on the Sunday sermons as he saw fit.
- The labors of Knox “were so successful during the few months that he preached at St. Andrews” that, besides the garrison in the castle, a great number of the townspeople renounced popery and became Protestant.
- Knox’s ministry at St. Andrews, however, suddenly came to an end when a fleet of twenty-one French ships arrived in June of 1547.
  - The Castilians were forced to surrender, and some 120 men, including Knox, were herded into the galleys as prisoners.
  - Knox spent the next nineteen months “confined as a galley slave, fixed in irons and forced to row between Scotland and France”
- When Knox was released in February of 1549, he was free to go wherever he wished, with the exception of Scotland. He chose to labor in England because the fields there were ripe for the harvest.
- Henry VIII had died in 1547, and the Reformation in England was well under way under the leadership of Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury.
  - Cranmer was gathering together a body of international Reformers to assist him in creating a Protestant state in England and to educate men at Oxford and Cambridge for pastoral ministry.
  - At the invitation of the Archbishop, scholars from the Continent—including Peter Martyr Vermigli, Martin Bucer and Jan Laski—came to England in the late 1540s. Vermigli taught at Oxford, and Bucer at Cambridge, while Jan Laski (John à Lasco) was appointed Superintendent of the Strangers’ Church of London

- These continental Reformers had a lasting impact on the faith and worship of the Church of England.
- When Knox began his service in the English Church, Cranmer had already made significant reforms.
  - He had introduced the administration of Communion in both kinds, “directing that the wine, as well as the bread, was to be given to the congregation” (Ridley, 88).
  - Images and crosses had been removed from churches, and prayers to the Virgin Mary and to the saints had been condemned (idem.).
  - A few weeks before Knox arrived in England, they made the greatest advance of all. The Act of Uniformity (1549) required that the old Latin church service should be replaced by the English service in the first *Book of Common Prayer* which Cranmer drafted
  - In fact, Knox arrived in London just in time to obtain an early copy of Cranmer’s new *Prayer Book* hot off the press
- Knox had gained quite a reputation by preaching at St. Andrews, and his name was already well-known among the English Protestants.
  - So Knox was licensed to serve as a minister in the Church of England, and his first appointment was the parish church in Berwick-upon-Tweed in the northern part of the country where the Tweed River forms the border between England and Scotland.
- This part of England was still largely unaffected by the Reformation. Berwick was in the diocese of the Bishop of Durham, Cuthbert Tunstall, who had opposed every Protestant reform introduced by Cranmer.
- When Knox arrived in Berwick, he began a pulpit crusade against the idolatrous worship of Rome. In particular, he strongly denounced the Mass as an abomination before God and blasphemous to the death of Christ.
- By 1550, this war against the Mass had attracted the rage of Bishop Tunstall, and Knox was summoned to appear before the Council of the North in Newcastle on 4 April 1550 to defend his teaching

- Knox preserved a written copy of his defense, which he later published under the title *A Vindication of the Doctrine That the Sacrifice of the Mass is Idolatry*
- When Cranmer was in the process of publishing a revision of the *Book of Common Prayer* in 1552, Knox infuriated Cranmer because he preached a sermon before the Privy Council arguing that the Prayer Book required an idolatrous practice—kneeling when receiving Communion.
  - Parliament had already approved the Prayer Book, and it was already in the process of being printed. But after Knox’s sermon, the Council sent word to the publisher instructing him to stop the presses until the matter could be settled.
- This infuriated Cranmer. Knox was not the most tactful or diplomatic of the Reformers, and he often angered people in high positions, especially political leaders and especially women.
  - The Council ended up ordering the inclusion of a rubric in the new Prayer Book that explains that kneeling was an expression of “humble and grateful acknowledging of the benefits of Christ, given unto the worthy receiver” and did not imply any adoration of the bread and wine since they were not physically transformed into the body and blood of Jesus.
  - In 1559, Queen Elizabeth ordered the rubric to be removed, which was one of the grievances that the Puritans had against her.
- Knox’s ministry in England came to an abrupt end when King Edward VI died in 1553, and Mary Tudor came to the throne (1553–1558).
- Mary was a devout Catholic and was determined to destroy Protestantism in the realm and restore Catholicism.
  - She has become known as Bloody Mary because she had nearly 300 Protestants burned at the stake including some of the most influential ministers in the church: John Hooper, Hugh Latimer, Nicholas Ridley and Thomas Cranmer.
  - Knox would certainly have been executed too, but he and many other English Protestants fled England and took refuge in various places on the continent.

- At first, Knox ended up taking refuge in the city of Frankfurt on the Main with about 200 other English refugees.
  - They were permitted to worship in a church in Frankfurt, but the congregation was soon divided into two groups regarding matters of worship.
  - Knox was the leader of one party, and Richard Cox was the leader of the other. Knoxians and the Coxians.
- The Coxian party insisted on using Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer* because they wanted the church of English refugees to have "an English face."
- Knox had increasingly become convinced that the *Book of Common Prayer* contained some things that were "superstitious, impure, unclean and imperfect."
  - He and the Knoxian party insisted on using Calvin's liturgy because they deemed it, as Knox put it, "most godly and farthest off from superstition."
- Unfortunately, Knox's ministry in Frankfurt abruptly came to an end when he was forced out of the city by his opponents.
  - He was expelled from Frankfurt because he compared Emperor Charles V to Nero. Again, his lack of tact and diplomacy got him into trouble. Later, Knox was forbidden to enter England after the publication of his *First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (Geneva, 1558) upset the newly crowned Elizabeth I.
- After leaving Frankfurt, Knox settled in Geneva and became the pastor of the English-speaking refugees who were permitted to worship in a building called the *Auditoire*
  - For their services of worship, Knox used an order that was drawn from Calvin's liturgy
  - This order was published in 1556 under the title *The Form of Prayers and Ministration of the Sacraments, etc. used in the English Congregation at Geneva: and approved by the famous and godly learned man, John Calvin.*
  - Today, it is often referred to as the *Genevan Book of Order* or simply as Knox's liturgy.



- Knox served this congregation until his return to Scotland in 1559.
- These were the happiest years of his ministry, and he considered Geneva to be “the most perfect school of Christ ... since the days of the apostles.”
- The *Genevan Book of Order* was already known in Scotland by the time that Knox returned.
  - In 1564, it was officially adopted as the standard of worship by an act of the General Assembly, which required every minister to “use the order contained therein, in prayers, marriage, and the administration of the sacraments.”
  - This *Book of Common Order*, as it came to be called, continued to be used in Scotland until it was superseded by the *Westminster Directory for Public Worship* in 1645.
- When Knox returned to Scotland in 1559, he found himself plunged into a revolution, which turned Scotland from Roman Catholic to Protestant in the course of two years.
  - In 1560, “Parliament voted to abolish the authority of the Pope in the realm, prohibited celebration of the Mass, and ratified the Scottish Confession of Faith, a creed that bears the decided influence of Knox” (p. 16, middle paragraph).
  - Knox wrote the Scottish Confession with five other Johns.
- So the Scottish Confession defined their theology; the Book of Common Order their liturgy, and the Book of Discipline defined their form of government (presbyterian). These documents functioned as the constitution of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland.
- Knox continued to serve as preacher and pastor until his death in 1572.

READ pp. 16–17 of book as the background of the Westminster Assembly