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UNLIKELY ORIGINS

KNOX'S UPBRINGING

[I am] uncertain as yet, what God shall further work in this country, except that I see the battle shall be great, for Satan rageth even to the uttermost; and I am come (I praise my God,) even in the brunt of the battle.¹

—John Knox, in a letter to Mrs. Anna Locke

To understand John Knox, one must understand the medieval era that shaped the time into which he was born. The trouble is that the medieval era is, perhaps, one of the most misunderstood eras in the history of the world. It encompasses a wide expanse of the centuries, sometimes thought to have lasted from the sixth century through the sixteenth century. Commonly, this almost one-thousand-year-long period has been represented by another title: the “Dark Ages”—a time when, secular historians often argue, mankind stopped his march of progress, turned barbaric in his dealings, and tossed all hopes of artistry and scientific achievement aside.

The reality, though, is much more nuanced than a simple title would have you believe. The Dark Ages weren’t all dark;

1 John Knox, *Letters, Chiefly Relating to the Progress of the Reformation in Scotland*, vol. 6 of *The Works of John Knox* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2014), 21. Language has been lightly updated by the author to modern English spellings.

there were, of course, achievements and advancements made in philosophy and theology. Great stories were told, legends were made, and cultures were built. Yet there was indeed *darkness* over the world at the time, especially of the spiritual variety. While there were certainly Christians who faithfully lived and died for Christ, there was a general confusing and conflating of the gospel during this period. Rather than looking to Jesus Christ alone as the author and finisher of man's faith, the seemingly monolithic Roman Catholic Church had, through a series of councils and popes, come to teach that man's salvation rests partially in Christ and partially in man himself.

The result of such teaching was no less than the darkening of the gospel, and thus the darkening of the church itself. This is one reason why one of the most famous mottos to come out of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century was "post tenebras lux" (after darkness, light). Spiritual darkness had cast a dimming shadow over the light of the gospel, but the rediscovery of the gospel by men such as Martin Luther and John Calvin had unleashed the light once more. The long night had passed, and while there were moon and stars to shine during that time, the dawning of the gospel brought a new sun that lit a fire upon this earth.

After all, Jesus had promised, "I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). This was not, as a long line of popes had suggested, a promise of continued apostolic succession beginning with Peter as the "vicar of Christ on earth," but, as the true Spirit-filled Christians of the day knew, a promise that Jesus would build His church on the testimony of the gospel. In fact, the true Spirit-filled Christians knew that this was no less than a promise of victory; Jesus would build His church through the spread of the gospel, and through the spread of the gospel, even the gates of hell themselves would fall.

But alongside the shadow cast across the gospel, the long medieval era was also marred by sin and decadence across much of Europe. Luther's Germany, Calvin's France (and later Switzerland), and Latimer's England were all plagued by this spiritual darkness.

This was, of course, no less true in Scotland where, despite the influence of Roman Catholicism, savagery reigned supreme. Sin ran rampant and unchecked. Wars and rumors of wars flooded the lands, and plagues chipped away at the population. Roman Catholicism offered decadence to the wealthy and royalty but little in the way of hope to the common man. Those who dared to stand against the theological tide were marked as enemies of Rome.

At the turn of the sixteenth century, Scotland also saw one of the most devastating defeats in the history of the nation. For the better part of two centuries, Scotland had found itself in periods of intermittent war with England. In 1502, Scotland signed the Treaty of Perpetual Peace with England to try to bring an end to the battles, but the treaty was anything but perpetual. By 1513, the two nations found themselves clashing once more. In a battle that included the ambitions of the French, the Italians, the papacy, and the Spaniards, along with the English and Scots, more than ten thousand Scots were killed, including their king.

The Treaty of Perpetual Peace was effectively broken when King James IV of Scotland chose to side with the French, who had been engaged in conflict with the English over territory. This he did in accordance with an even older treaty, the Auld Alliance, which was an alliance between France and Scotland created in 1295 to fight together against England. However, this decision earned the ire of Pope Leo X and English Cardinal Christopher Bainbridge, who saw James IV's siding with the French as the breaking of the Treaty of Perpetual Peace. Pope Leo X excommunicated James IV, and the Scots resisted at the Battle of Flodden on September 9, 1513. However, in a chivalrous move,² James IV first sent notice to the English that he planned to invade them, almost a whole month in advance.

The battle was a disaster. James IV led an army of Scots thirty thousand strong and managed to take Norham Castle from the

2 The code of chivalry was akin to a medieval code of honor that taught knights and royalty how to live, fight, and die with piety, honor, and magnanimity.

English in August, but his alerting the English of his intentions permitted them the necessary time to gather forces to defend themselves. By the morning of September 10, 1513, everything changed. One historian described the devastation in this way:

When dawn broke on the morning of 10 September 1513, the landscape of hell was revealed. On the gently undulating northern ridges of Branxton Hill, more than 10,000 men lay dead or dying. In the midst of the carnage were the naked, plundered bodies of King James, his natural half-brother, Alexander Stewart, who was Archbishop of St Andrews, George Hepburn, who was Bishop of the Isles, two abbots, nine great earls of Scotland, fourteen lords of parliament, innumerable knights and noblemen of lesser degree and thousands of ploughmen, farmers, weavers and burgesses. It was the appalling aftermath of the battle of Flodden, the greatest military disaster in Scotland's history.³

Back at home, King James IV's wife, Queen Margaret Tudor, awaited news of her husband with their infant son, James V. By October 21, 1513, James V was named king of Scotland at only seventeen months old, though he would not personally begin to rule until 1528. To help rule and reign until he was of proper age, regents were set in place, such as his mother and later his cousin, Duke John of Albany. This left Scotland without a proper ruler and king for a number of years.

Eventually, the teenaged James V would find himself under the tutelage and care of his stepfather, Archibald Douglas, Sixth Earl of Angus. After a series of foiled escape attempts, James V would successfully flee from Douglas and find his mother, who had been secretly trying to divorce the Earl of Angus and marry her new lover, Henry Stewart. (As stated earlier, this was a time of savagery and decadence, and much of it centered around the love affairs of the nobles and royalty.) Once away from the earl, James V

3 Alistair Moffat, *Scotland: A History from Earliest Times* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Birlinn Limited, 2015), loc. 3822 of 12933, Kindle.

executed his revenge by enacting the equivalent of a modern-day restraining order, forbidding the earl and the rest of the Douglas clan from coming within seven miles of himself.

It was a confusing and turbulent time in Scotland, with many battles being fought across the realm, both physical and political. But this was also the backdrop of John Knox's birth in Scotland; and it was, by the Lord's decree, a field ripe and ready for the harvest, simply awaiting the laborer who was soon to enter the labor of the Lord. As Esther was once told by her cousin Mordecai, Knox was born "for such a time as this" (Esther 4:14).

Of Unknown Time and Place

If 1513 is famous in the history of Scotland because of the devastating results of the Battle of Flodden, then 1517 is a year that is infamous the world over, for that was the year that the Protestant Reformation began in earnest. On October 31 of that year, Martin Luther famously nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Within this short treatise, Luther argued against the Roman Catholic Church's practice of indulgences—a practice that had duped many gullible men and women into first believing that there existed such a place as purgatory (an intermediate state between earth and heaven wherein the saved would go to be further purged of their sins by fire before being allowed entrance into God's holy presence), and then believing that they could theoretically buy tickets to heaven by giving money to the church. Luther rightly saw this as a corrupt and abominable practice that turned the house of God into a den of thieves. Luther incorrectly thought that the pope would agree with him. Little did he know how far down—or up—the corruption and rot had actually spread within Roman Catholicism.

John Knox was probably born about a year or so after the death of King James IV and would have been about three years old when Luther was hammering the nails to the church's door in Wittenberg. The boy would have been far too young to really know much of what was happening in the world at large, as Scotland found

itself with a child king and the Reformation really began to find its legs, but he was also born into a world wherein he would never know anything other than reformation and rebellion and conflict. In fact, almost his whole life was lived during the major years of the Protestant Reformation. Yet who could have imagined that the infant Knox, probably just a bit younger than Scotland's new King James V and only just learning to talk in complete sentences on the day Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses, would become one of the most influential leaders of that very same Protestant movement?

As amazingly utilized by God as he would be in his later life, the truth is that Knox's actual year of birth is unknown. His town of origin is, likewise, shrouded in darkness. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is even confusion surrounding where exactly he was educated, as we will see in the next chapter.

While it is generally thought by historians today that Knox was probably born in 1514 or 1515, there are conflicting dates. Some, like the nineteenth-century historian David Laing, originally recorded that Knox was born in 1505.⁴ How does the date of a man's birth, whose life bears the magnitude and weight of the magisterial John Knox, become so obscured as to include a margin of error of a full decade? It was a different time, and while Knox painstakingly recorded a great deal of information about the history of the Reformation in Scotland, he did not record history about himself with that same meticulous detail. Whatever the case—whether Knox was three or thirteen when Luther wrote his Ninety-Five Theses—the truth remains that almost all of Knox's life was consumed by the Reformation.

The obscure details related to his early years make pinpointing his actual birthplace rather difficult too. It is likely that Knox was born either in the village of Gifford in East Lothian or on a street called Giffordgate in the town of Haddington, also part of East Lothian. It is likely that some of this confusion over his town of

4 David Laing, ed., *The Works of John Knox* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2014), 1:xiii.