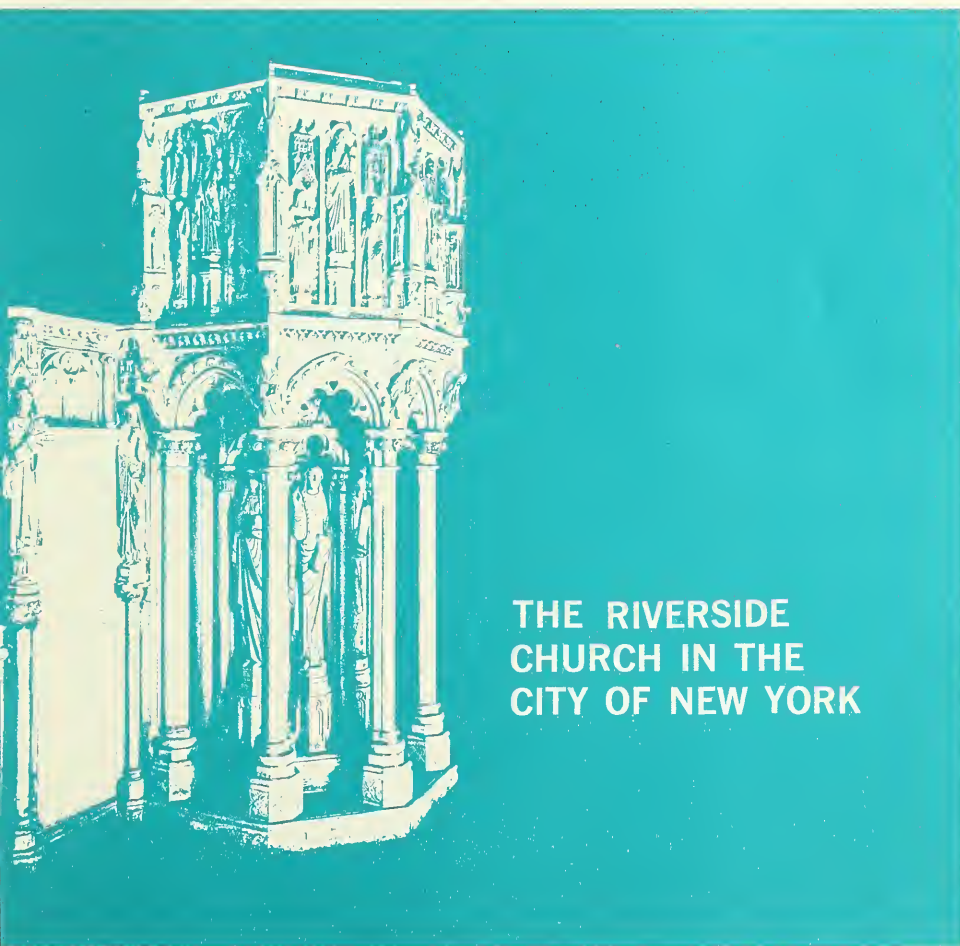


SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE


THE LEGACY OF JOHN KNOX ON THE
400th ANNIVERSARY OF HIS DEATH

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Today is Reformation Sunday. It is a day that invites reflection on that movement in the 16th Century that brought Protestantism to birth and led the Roman Catholic Church to a counter-reformation of its own.

It is the feeling of some -- perhaps many -- that Reformation Sunday ought to go unnoticed in the interest of preserving the amiability that presently marks Protestant -- Roman Catholic relations in this country.

I do not subscribe to this point of view. Not because I do not value the growing concord between Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians here and around the world, but because I believe that the Reformation can be celebrated without calling up past hostilities or opening wounds that have long since healed. To know who we are religiously; to know the stock from which we are sprung; to have some idea of the cost of the ground that has been secured to us; is not to love others less, but more adequately to cherish our inheritance!

Usually when we think of the Reformation we entertain thoughts of men like Martin Luther, John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli. Because he will be dead 400 years this November, and because he is not so well known as he deserves to be, I want us today to get better acquainted with the reformer John Knox.

* * *

John Knox is credited with planting the Reformation on Scottish soil. Others had a hand in this, to be sure. The Lollards with their tracks and sermons. Preachers like George Wishart. Moreover, the general state of history at that time helped ready the soil for the seed.

Nevertheless, it is not stretching truth to say that had John Knox not answered, "Yes," when the call came, the history of Scotland, the history of England, indeed, even the history of these United States, would have been forever different!

John Knox is popularly remembered for his five private confrontations with Mary Queen of Scots and for the 19 months that he served in a French galley. He deserves to be better known as a writer who gave us a history of the Scottish Reformation, as a fervent and compelling preacher, as a shrewd reader of political weather, as an able organizer, as the first revolutionary of modern times, and as a sincere, if occasionally misguided, believer in his Savior and Redeemer Jesus Christ.

Knox came upon the scene after the Reformation had been fairly well established in many parts of Europe. The church of Scotland in his day was more corrupt than the church had been in any other land. Even Roman Catholic historians are willing to bear this out. Largely through the energies of John Knox, that church was replaced by a church that featured an open Bible in the language of the people, participation in worship of congregations equipped with service-books and psalm-books in their own tongue, the rediscovery of the Communion as a corporate action, communion in both kinds (bread and cup), clerical marriage, the participation of the laity in church affairs, renewed emphasis on the parish, the revival of efficient oversight of the clergy and churches and the elimination of abuses.

* * *

What are the lessons to be learned from this man of peasant parentage who went on to make his mark on history? To come under the influence of John Knox is to be made aware that the right to rebel against established power may be, in fact, a Christian duty.

Too frequently it has been assumed that obedience

to Christ automatically makes one a devotee of law and order. John Knox, of all the Reformers, believed that, given sufficient provocation, oppressed people had the duty, not merely the right, to rid themselves of tyrants. John Calvin went so far as to affirm that "lesser magistrates," that is, the nobility, had some responsibility in this area. But Calvin shrank from saying that the masses had the right to assume responsibility for those who governed them. Knox was not reluctant. This is why he is referred to as the first revolutionary of modern times.

How he felt about this matter comes out clearly in one of his conversations with Mary Queen of Scots. The monarch turned to her unwanted prophet and said, "Think ye that subjects having power may resist their princes?" Knox replied, "If their princes exceed their bounds, Madam, they may be resisted and even deposed."

Knox believed that the people of Egypt were punished not for the sins of Pharoah but for their own sin in failing to make a revolution against Pharoah. In other words, it was his conviction that people deserve the kind of government they get.

Doubtless such a belief can be, and often has been, abused. But we ought to be slow to condemn John Knox. He had intimate associations with the Puritanism of Scotland, which in time became the Puritanism of England, and eventually the Puritanism of New England that undergirded our own revolution which followed his death by some 200 years!

Let it be credited to the account of John Knox that he was the first man in modern times to recognize that the essence of a state is not raw power but moral duty.

* * *

To come under the influence of John Knox is to be made aware that Christians must take history seriously. The Reformation gave birth to many forms of

piety that practised retreat from history. Sects arose in which salvation was defined as a personal, inner transaction that had very little to do with the on-going life of the world. The world was to be endured, if not evacuated. History was seen as a static stage on which decisions for eternity were registered. Besides, the life of man was so corrupt, so crowded with injustices, who could make a difference anyway?

There is much talk these days about why conservative churches are growing. This is a lively topic and we ought to look at it together sometime. While there may be all kinds of good reasons why conservative churches are growing, I suspect that there is one major negative reason. Conservative churches tend not to take history seriously. They purvey a world-denying kind of piety that offers their constituency a safe haven from responsibility for history.

Not so John Knox! God had a will for the church, yes. And for men and women in the church, yes. But God also has a will for the world. It mattered to Knox as a religious man and as a citizen of Scotland how affairs of state went.

When it was bruited about that the Queen might marry the Archduke of Austria, or Don Carlos, the son of Philip II of Spain, John Knox objected. Either union would upset the balance of power between reformed and Catholic states. That balance of power mattered much to John Knox.

I think his heart would have warmed to the kind of announcements that were made here today. He believed in the fusion of devotion and action. He would have been troubled by a school in Brooklyn that could find no seats for the disadvantaged. He would have gotten under the plight of the migrant worker.

When the new church was born in Scotland and the old church yielded up its wealth, it was John Knox's belief that that wealth should be used to support the church, to provide relief for the poor, and to

establish public education in the country. It is significant that public education became a fact in Scotland in 1696, but did not become a reality in England until 1870. The difference can be traced to the importance Knox attached to general education. Knox saw the church as ^{PART OF} God's grand design for the betterment of all life.

* * *

To come under the influence of John Knox is to be made aware that devotion to God does not save one from foolish blunders and costly mistakes.

I have in mind here not simply the rather bizarre Old Testament exegesis that undergirded much of his preaching, or the forced analogies that he drew between events in the Bible and events of his own day. I am thinking rather of that unfortunate publication of his, which has earned him the wrath of womankind ever since, entitled, "The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women."

George Parks Fisher of Yale, in typical Ivy League understatement, called this "an unlucky publication." In no way can we make John Knox an early advocate of women's liberation! We might try to excuse him by pointing out that he only said aloud what most men of that time thought. It could also be noted that the King of Scotland in that day had no army at his command. Frequently he had to take the field himself and provide military leadership. Knox could hardly see women in that role. We might even remind ourselves that in his personal relationships with women - those with whom he corresponded, those who were married to him, his mother-in-law, and his daughters - he was a gentle and tender individual. It could also be said in his defense that his treatise was aimed at two women only, Mary Guise and Mary Tudor, later known as Bloody Mary.

Having said all this, Knox's untiring loyalty to what he took to be the cause of Christ did not

spare him the folly of making a regrettable mistake. That tract was not only tactically unwise, it was morally wrong as well.

What Knox did easily finds us at a similar point of weakness. Instead of concentrating his fire on those who gave rise to his ire, he generalized his condemnation. From two women he went to all women.

A woman in Paris took a costly fur coat to her furrier for summer storage. When she went back in the fall to pick up her coat it was discovered that the garment had gotten lost. She summed up her irritation by saying flatly, "I hate Jews!" At most she was entitled only to "hate" bungling clerks who work in fur shops.

Why is it that we move so easily from local experience to general judgment? What Knox did cost him heavily. Queen Elizabeth never forgave him. She was in a position to help his cause along, but did not often trouble herself to do so.

* * *

Finally, to come under the influence of John Knox is to discover the steadying power of personal faith in Christ.

John Knox did not make many friends. Most leaders do not. He was given to moods of melancholy. After one of his skirmishes with Mary Queen of Scots, he went home and prayed, "Lord Jesus, put an end to this my miserable life, for justice and truth are not to be found among the sons of men."

He was called upon to feed a variety of people who looked to him for insight and direction, but he had few peers who could minister to him. He had the care of the infant church in Scotland, and was almost daily making decisions that would affect the lives of countless others. The story of Knox's life is the story of a man who drew on inner reserves as he

pursued his public mission.

We are not left in doubt about the nature of his hidden resources. As he lay dying he turned to his wife and asked her "to read in the Bible where I cast my first anchor." She opened to the Gospel of John and read from the 17th chapter, a portion of Scripture that has been described as a soliloquy of God himself! Strange that this flaming preacher did not wish to hear from Amos or Hosea, Micah or Jeremiah. The high priestly prayer of Jesus answered his soul's deep need.

This was the other side of John Knox. According to his biographers, he seemed unable to articulate the inner mystical union that he felt with the living Christ. One of his contemporaries, Thomas Randolph, said, "The voice of this one man is able in one hour to put more life in us than 500 trumpets blustering in our ears." We know now where Knox got that life.

The man who is famous for having said, "Give me Scotland or I die," had earlier said, "Give me Christ or I cannot live!"

CLOSING PRAYER

*Forgive us, Lord, if we have under-valued
our inheritance, under-estimated our
potential, or under-played our role in
history.*

*Give us eyes, we pray thee, for the vision
Jesus saw;*

*And the power of His spirit to achieve
the same.*

In His strong name we pray. Amen.

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