

## JOHN KNOX: A CASE STUDY IN BIBLICAL SOCIAL ACTIVISM

James E. Huff

If by the term “social activism” we mean the influence of Christianity on culture according to God’s holy, infallible word, then we can demonstrate the influences of John Knox, not only in Scotland, but also in the United States. If by the term “social activism” we include Christians being salt and light in the midst of a pagan culture, then we can demonstrate like influence of John Knox on the culture of Scotland. We do not mean by “social activism” an anthropological social-gospel Christianity; but, rather one that is God-centered, that emphasizes the sovereignty of God over every area of life.

John Knox saw his responsibility before God to bring reformation to Scotland according to the word of God. John Knox had learned his theology from John Calvin in Geneva. The historian Froude says of Knox:

John Knox, to whose teaching they (the Scotch) owed the *national existence*. Such was Knox, the greatest of living Scotchmen.

No grander figure can be found in the entire history of the Reformation in this island than that of Knox. Cromwell and Burghley rank beside him for the work which they effected, but as politicians and statesmen they had to labor with instruments with which they soiled their hands in touching. In purity, in uprightness, in courage, truth and stainless honor the regent Murray and our English Latimer were perhaps his equals; but Murray was intellectually far below him, and the sphere of Latimer’s influence was on small scale. The time has come when English history may do justice to one but for whom the *Reformation would have been overthrown* among ourselves; for the spirit which Knox created saved Scotland; and if Scotland had been Catholic again, neither the wisdom of Elizabeth’s ministers, nor the teaching of her bishops, nor her own chicaneries, would have preserved England from revolution. His was the voice which taught the peasant of the Lothians that he was a free man, the equal in the sight of God with the proudest peer or prelate that had trampled on his forefathers. He was the one antagonist whom Mary Stuart could not soften nor Maitland deceive; he it was that raised the poor Commons of his country into a stern and rugged people, who might be hard, narrow, superstitious and fanatical, but who, nevertheless, were men whom neither king, noble nor priest could force again to submit to tyranny. And his reward has been the ingratitude of those who should most have done honor to his memory. [Quoted in N. S. McFetridge, *Calvinism in History*, pp. 24-25]

John Knox stressed the necessity of resistance to tyranny (whether ecclesiastical or civil) as a Biblical mandate. At one time Knox recommended flight as the main option when faced with tyrannical government, but later modified his views between the accession of Mary I and the accession of Elizabeth I (1558). His modified views allowed “for greater amounts of resistance to ungodly rulers. In his *First Blast of the Trumpet* (1558), Knox called on the lesser

magistrates to punish idolatry and blasphemy. He charged them with the obligation of resisting such, even permitting the execution of the queen. Knox believed that ecclesiastical reformation should be supported by the magistrates, and began to license even the masses to depose and execute an idolatrous civil leader:

...punishment of such crimes, as are idolatrie, blasphemie, and others that tuche the Majesty of God, dothe not appertain to kinges and chefe rulers only, but also to the whole body of that people, and every member of the same, according to the vocation of everie man, and according to that possibilitie and occasion which God doth minister. [cited in David W. Hall, *Savior or Servant?*, p. 230.]

One of the most well known examples of Knox's views on resistance was his reply to Mary Stuart when she asked him, "Think ye," said the queen, "that subjects having the power may resist their princes?" Knox replied:

If princes exceed their bounds, Madam, and do that which they ought not, they may doubtless be resisted even by power. For neither is greater honor nor greater obedience to be given to kings and princes, than God has commanded to be given to father and mother. But, Madam, the father may be struck with a frenzy, in which he would slay his own children. Now, Madam, if the children arise, join together, apprehend him, take the sword from him, bind his hands, and keep him in prison till the frenzy be over, think ye, madam, that the children do any wrong? Even so is it, Madam, with princes who would murder the children of God who are subject unto them. Their blind zeal is nothing but mad frenzy; and, therefore, to take the sword from them, to bind their hands, and to cast them into prison till they be brought to a sober mind, is not disobedience against princes, but a just obedience, because it agreeth with the will of God. [N. S. McFetridge, *Calvinism in History*, page iv]

Knox's patriotism continued to influence the nation of Scotland many years later. On June 22, 1680, the Sanquhar Declaration was read before twenty men who had ridden into town on horseback with swords drawn and pistols in their hands and before assembled townspeople. It stated that as their (i.e., the 20 men) being under the standard of "...our Lord Jesus Christ, Captain of Salvation" that they "do declare war with such a tyrant and usurper, and all the men of his practices, as enemies to our Lord Jesus Christ and His cause and Covenants; and against all such as have strengthened him, sided with, or anywise acknowledged him in his tyranny, civil or ecclesiastic." (Alexander Smellie, *Men of the Covenant*, p. 336) These Cameronians had been influenced by John Knox and his ministry.

Knox's influence in these areas was especially through his idea of "covenant." Knox wrote in "An Admonition or Warning That the Faithful Christians in London, etc....May Avoid God's Vengeance" that Christians must covenant

... "betwixt God and us, that He alone shall be our God and we shall be His people...we shall seek to Him and we shall flee from all strange gods." This meant opposing idolatry in order to remain in covenant with the true God and thus avoid eternal damnation. Knox dealt with covenant again in a tract on baptism in 1556, but stated his views most fully in

his 1558 *Appellation* to the nobility, estates, and commonwealth of Scotland. Here Knox based his concept of a covenant that binds government and people under the law of God very firmly on his understanding of the Old Testament. He cited King Josiah's calling the Israelites to obey the rediscovered law (II Kings 23). Hence temporal rulers must reform religion and extirpate idolatry. [Douglas F. Kelly, *The Emergence of Liberty in the Modern World, The Influence of Calvin on Five Governments from the 16<sup>th</sup> Through 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, p. 54]

The impact of Knox on Scotland was monumental, especially in the area of applying the principles of God's word to the relationships between government and governed. Among those principles are the elevation of the common man to equal standing and accountability with the king according to the laws of a country and according to the laws of God, and that the king does not rule according to his own whims. Knox did not separate his ministerial duties from his responsibilities to the nation. Their source was one and the same — the Bible. Christians today would do well to recall this man of God and the example he set. Civil matters are our responsibility. The influences of Knox have been reflected in the history of Presbyterianism in the United States, too. James Thornwell said:

As the individual, in coming to God, must believe that He is, and that He is the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him, so the State must be impressed with a profound sense of His all-pervading providence, and of its responsibility to Him as the moral Ruler of the world. The powers that be are ordained of Him. From Him the magistrate receives his commission, and in His fear he must use the sword as a terror to evildoers and a praise to them that do well. Civil government is an institute of Heaven, founded in the character of man as social and moral, and is designed to realize the idea of justice. Take away the notion of mutual rights and the corresponding notions of duty and obligation, and a Commonwealth is no more conceivable among men than among brutes. As the State is essentially moral in its idea, it connects itself directly with the government of God. It is, indeed, the organ through which that government is administered in its relations to the highest interests of earth. A State, therefore, which does not recognize its dependence upon God, or which fails to apprehend, in its functions and offices, a commission from heaven, is false to the law of its own being. The moral finds its source and centre only in God. There can be no rights without responsibility, and responsibility is incomplete until it terminates in a Supreme Will. The earthly sanctions of the State, its rewards and punishments, are insufficient either for the punishment of vice or the encouragement of virtue, unless they connect themselves with the higher sanctions which religion discloses." (*The Collected Writings of James Henly Thornwell*, vol. 4, "Ecclesiastical," pp. 514-5)