

Reformation Commemoration

“If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

I was just reminded last Sunday that this month sees the 450th anniversary of the Reformation in Scotland, and I thought it would be a shame to let it go by unmarked. I mentioned it in passing some time ago, but I want to focus more specifically on it today. Strictly speaking the Reformation was a long process which had started several years previously, but it was in August 1560 that the Scottish Parliament repudiated the Pope’s authority in Scotland, forbade the mass, and approved a Protestant Confession of Faith.

It has surprised me how little has been done to commemorate this year. Having said that, plans were announced just a couple of weeks ago of a joint commemoration in November between the church and the Scottish Government, with a day conference in Edinburgh, an Ecumenical Service in St. Giles, and an evening reception hosted by First Minister Alex Salmond in the great hall at Edinburgh Castle. The Church is also planning a touring exhibition.

I was interested to come across an article by a Roman Catholic writer, Kevin McKenna, where he severely criticises the Scottish Government and the Church of Scotland for their reluctance to celebrate this anniversary. He writes that the Reformation is a “crucially important event in the history of Scotland” and part of the nation’s “Christian heritage which bequeathed to us our schools, universities, democratic institutions and legal framework.”

“Yet”, he says, “The Church of Scotland itself seems to be almost apologetic about the anniversary and does not appear to have any plans for a fanfare.”

I was also very pleased to see a feature about this anniversary on *Reporting Scotland* during the week, where those interviewed saw the Reformation in a very positive light. One of the contributors was Tom Devine, a history professor at Edinburgh University. He has written elsewhere:

In the secular Scotland of this new millennium, the Reformation usually has a bad press. The Calvinist tradition that has moulded the nation is seen through a negative lens. Its malignant influence is said to have spawned intolerance, oppressive social disciplines, an aggressive and rapacious capitalism, sexual guilt and dysfunction, and warped attitudes to music, painting and the creative arts, which have only been changing in recent generations.

There may be some truth in all of these stereotypes, but they reveal only one side of the coin, and entirely ignore the profoundly positive influence which reformed Protestantism also had on Scottish history. I wish to argue here, for instance, that Calvinism was a key factor inspiring that great flowering of intellectual culture in the 18th century, the Scottish Enlightenment.

He goes on to argue that the emphasis that the Reformers put on education had a profound effect on Scottish culture. Their objective was to have a school for every parish. They were committed to developing a basic level of literacy so that ordinary people could read the bible and understand the lengthy sermons which were preached to communicate the truths of the gospel. He basically says that the Reformation led to a society with a respect for learning that encouraged people to think for themselves. He writes: Arguably, the Scottish Enlightenment’s central focus on trying to understand the bases of human conduct, the ideas which evolved in time into the modern subjects of economics, sociology and anthropology, has its roots in Scottish Calvinism’s obsession with human morality and man’s relation to God.

I can't help feeling that he misses out on the main issues of the Reformation, its spiritual impact on the nation, and the spiritual legacy that has come down to us. To be fair he maybe sees that as outside the scope of his work. However, for us it is of the utmost importance. We should be in no doubt that the great desire of the Reformers was that all people should have the opportunity to read and understand the word of God for themselves; that they should come to a personal and living faith. These were men who were raised up by God. Some of them made great sacrifices in order to advance the purposes of God's Kingdom, and make the knowledge of his word freely available. The nation was greatly blessed as many men and women discovered what it meant to come into a living relationship with the risen Christ.

The Scottish Reformation is set very firmly in the context of the Reformation in the rest of Europe, particularly in Germany and Switzerland. It all started when a German monk by the name of [Martin Luther](#) was particularly bothered by the selling of indulgences. An indulgence was a religious pardon that released a sinner from performing specific penalties and it could be bought from a church official for various fees. What really annoyed Martin Luther was the idea given by certain church officials, stating that you could basically buy your way into heaven. To express his growing concern of church corruption, Martin Luther wrote his famous *Ninety-Five Theses*, which called for a full reform of the Christian Church. On October 31, 1517 he posted it to the church doors at Wittenberg, in Germany and invited people to debate him on it. At that stage he had no intention of breaking from Rome. However, he was left with no choice when he was branded an outlaw and heretic and excommunicated by the Pope.

Martin Luther's writings quickly spread and generated much debate and discussion. They reached Paris, where a young Scottish student, Patrick Hamilton, a great grandson of King James II of Scotland, was greatly influenced by Luther's teachings. After graduating in 1520 Hamilton returned to Scotland and studied at St. Andrew's University before being appointed to the staff there.

Hamilton was keen to communicate the gospel message to his fellow Scots. Eventually, in 1527, his preaching was brought to the attention of Archbishop James Beaton. On February 29th, 1528 he was found guilty of heresy and sentenced to be burnt at the stake. The execution was carried out the same day to prevent friends attempting to rescue him. He burned from noon to 6.00 p.m. His last words were, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

The courageous way in which he faced his death attracted more attention than ever to the doctrines for which he suffered, and helped spread the Reformation all over Scotland. It was said that the "reek of Patrick Hamilton infected all it blew on". His martyrdom won over the theologian Alexander Ales, who had previously opposed him. Ales himself later became a wanted man and fled to the continent. Also in St. Andrews at that time was a young student named George Wishart, who I've spoken about on a previous occasion. He did not witness the horror of the execution, but nevertheless it had a profound effect on him. Wishart himself went on to become a powerful preacher as well as friend and mentor to the young John Knox before eventually meeting a similar end to Patrick Hamilton, also in St. Andrew's, eighteen years later. John Knox is rightly recognised as the main driving force behind the Reformation in Scotland, but he himself was very much aware of how the scene had been set. When he documents Patrick Hamilton's execution he comments, "For soon all Scotland asked: 'Wherefore was Master Patrick burnt?'"

In 1547, the year after George Wishart's execution and the murder of Cardinal David Beaton, John Knox was called to be minister for the Parish Church of St. Andrew's. However, his ministry there lasted only a few weeks. St. Andrew's castle had been captured by some of the Protestant nobles. Mary of Guise, regent for her infant daughter, Mary Queen of Scots, requested help from the King of France. A fleet of French Galleys

arrived at St Andrew's and the Protestant nobles and a number of other people, including John Knox were captured and forced to be galley slaves. They were chained to benches and forced to row throughout the day without changing posture while an officer watched over them with a whip in hand.

After his release two years later John Knox took refuge in England before spending time in Geneva and Frankfurt. In 1555 he returned to Scotland. Despite initial doubts about the state of the Reformation in Scotland, Knox found the country significantly changed since he had been carried off in the galley in 1547. When he toured various parts of Scotland preaching the reformed doctrines and liturgy, he was welcomed by many of the nobility.

Though the queen regent, Mary of Guise, made no move to act against Knox, his activities caused concern among the church authorities. The bishops of Scotland viewed him as a threat to their authority and summoned him to appear in [Edinburgh](#) on 15 May 1556. He was accompanied to the trial by so many influential people that the bishops decided to call the hearing off. Knox was now free to preach openly in Edinburgh. William Keith, the [Earl HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Earl_Marischal"Marischal](#), was impressed and urged Knox to write to the queen regent. Knox's unusually respectful letter urged her to support the Reformation and overthrow the church hierarchy. Mary took the letter as a joke and ignored it.

Shortly after Knox sent this letter he suddenly announced that he felt his duty was to return to Geneva. The English speaking congregation there had elected Knox as their minister. For the next two years he worked in Geneva in association with John Calvin.

In May 1559 John Knox again returned to Scotland. He was declared an outlaw, but his preaching gathered increasing support. The confrontations led to rioting and the ensuing conflict was little short of a civil war. On 24th October 1559 the Scottish nobility formally deposed Mary of Guise as Regent, and her secretary, William Maitland defected to the Protestant side, bringing his considerable administrative skills.

On 1 August 1560, the [Scottish Parliament](#) met to settle religious issues. Knox and five other ministers were called upon to draw up a new [confession of faith](#). Within four days, the [Scots Confession](#) was presented to Parliament, voted upon, and approved. A week later, the Parliament passed three acts in one day: the first abolished the jurisdiction of the pope in Scotland, the second condemned all doctrine and practice contrary to the reformed faith, and the third forbade the celebration of mass in Scotland. Before the dissolution of Parliament, Knox and the other ministers were given the task of organising the newly reformed church or [the Kirk](#). They would work for several months on the [Book of Discipline](#), the document describing the organisation of the new church.

That has obviously been a very brief and incomplete sketch of the Reformation in Scotland. The Church of Scotland was certainly far from settled in 1560. I think that it is important that we recognise that what motivated Patrick Hamilton, George Wishart, John Knox and others was the desire for the freedom of the Word of God. In a very real sense they wanted to empower the ordinary people by enabling them to discover their identity as children of the living God. They understood that performing particular rituals and doing good works were totally inadequate as a means of getting right with God. They recognised that a personal faith in Jesus Christ was the only way of salvation, and that his death on the cross was sufficient to deal with sin. I'm sure some of the other benefits of the Reformation we touched on are of importance, but let us never forget that central to everything else was the shift on emphasis away from human effort back to God's grace. Let us not forget the debt we owe to the Reformers for making the gospel truths freely available to Scotland.