

Calvin & Knox' Relationship Of Mutual Love And Esteem

In May 1554 John Knox went to Geneva where he, for the first time, met John Calvin face to face. It is apparent that there had been correspondence between the two prior to this time, as Calvin had recommended Knox to Bullinger at least as early as March of the same year.[1]

The exact path that Knox trod to get to Geneva, and the reasons for it, go beyond the purview of this article. It was in January 1554 that Knox began this journey when he was forced into exile from England. This was due to the ascension to the throne of the devoted Roman Catholic, Mary Tudor, more popularly known as Bloody Mary, and as a consequence of the persecution she aimed at Protestants upon her ascension.

After some wanderings, but immediately prior to visiting Geneva, Knox travelled throughout parts of Switzerland.[2] In a loving pastoral letter to his afflicted brethren in England, Knox writes of this time:

My awne estait is this: since the 28th of Januar, I have travellit through all the congregationis of Helvetia, and hes reasonit with all the Pastouris and many other excellentlie learnit men upon sic matters as now I can not commit to wrytting: gladlie I wold be toung or be pen utter the same to Godis glory.[3]

Despite the trying circumstances that had forced him from his beloved Scotland and England, it is obvious from this account that Knox must have entered Geneva refreshed after having had his spirits raised by godly fellowship among the Reformed in Helvetia. It is in this mood and on this occasion that Knox first became personally acquainted with the celebrated Calvin, and formed that intimate friendship which subsisted between them till the death of the latter, in 1564.[4]

It is this relationship that we wish to explore, just a little, in this article. The relationship is one which Knox's biographer, McCrie, summarises accurately, succinctly and well, when he speaks of the mutual respect of the two Reformers, and hints at reasons for it. Writes he:

They were nearly of the same age; and there was a striking similarity in their sentiments, and in the prominent features of their character. The Genevan Reformer was highly pleased with the piety and talents of Knox, who, in his turn, entertained a greater esteem and deference for Calvin than for any other of the reformers.[5]

But let us examine the truth of this just a little more fully. Strained Relations

While McCrie's observation is accurate, even the best of friends are not immune to "rocky" periods in their relationship. And the same is true of Calvin and Knox. They had a close friendship. It was a close friendship built upon mutual respect. But there were times when they were not well pleased with each other. The most notable example of this was occasioned by Knox's First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women. This book contains Knox's vigorous views against the rule of women in the civil sphere.

In a letter to William Cecil,[6] Calvin explains how he sympathised with Knox's position, theologically, but he had explained to Knox in a private conversation that "certain women had sometimes been so gifted that the singular blessing of God was conspicuous in them, and made it manifest that they had been raised up by the providence of God . . .".[7] Moreover, writes Calvin,

...It did not seem proper to me that this question should be mooted, not only because the thing was odious in itself, but because in my judgment it is not permitted to unsettle governments that have been set up by the peculiar providence of God.[8]

It is on the basis of this, that Calvin then goes on to pass the most severe criticism upon Knox. In the process of explaining why he had been hesitant to criticise the Scottish Reformer earlier he says:

...I had reason to fear, if the affair had been brought to trial, that for the inconsiderate vanity of one man, an unfortunate crowd of exiles would have been driven not only from this city, but from almost every part of the world, especially as the evil now admitted of no other remedy than the exercise of indulgence.[9]

Strong words indeed! but these were the most severe words that occurred in the relationship of these two Reformers, and they were written in an era when strong words were more the accepted norm than they are today. Knox's Regard for Calvin

There are few letters extant that Knox wrote to Calvin. Nevertheless, we can gain an idea of how Knox regarded the Genevan reformer from a number of avenues.

In the first place, Knox had cause to write to Calvin on a number of occasions concerning the problems he was having with the English congregation in Frankfurt.[10] This, in itself, shows the high esteem he had for his fellow Reformer.

Further however, the extent of his esteem is seen in that Knox followed the advice of Calvin.[11]

In the second place, Knox's writings are sprinkled with occasional references to Calvin. Although brief, these references show the high regard he has for the Genevan Reformer. Just one example will serve to illustrate this point. In 1554, Knox wrote A Godly Letter to the Faithful in London. In this letter, in commenting on the need to plainly condemn the idolatry of the Roman mass, Knox writes of Calvin: "Heir is to be observit, as that singular instrument of God, Johne Calvin, maist diligently noteth, that the rest of the Prophetis warkis wes writtin in the Hebrew tounge . . ."[12]

Also there is that famous pronouncement by Knox concerning Geneva in general, although it is obvious that he has Calvin very firmly in his sights. He writes, in a letter to his friend, Mrs Anne Locke:

...In my hart I wald haif wishit, yea and can not cease to wish, that it wold pleas God to gyd and conduct your self to this place, whair I nether feir nor eschame to say is the maist perfyte school of chryst that ever was in the erth since the dayis of the Apostillis. In other places I confess Chryst to be trewlie preachit; but maneris and religioun so sinceirly reformat, I have not yit sene in any uther place....[13] Calvin's Regard for Knox

There is much evidence to show how highly Calvin regarded the Scottish Reformer. This comes out in a number of different ways.

Firstly, we can see something of Calvin's love for and esteem of Knox in the letters he wrote to him personally. In one, dated 7th November 1559,[14] the Genevan Reformer begins with this respectful greeting: "I answer your letter, most excellent brother . . ."[15]

He concludes the same letter:

Farewell most excellent sir and our very dear brother. The whole assembly of the pious in our name wish you prosperity; and we pray God that he may govern you all by his spirit even to the end, sustain you by his power, and shield you with his protection.[16]

In another letter, dated 23rd April 1561, Calvin shows his concern for Knox's well being. Some misunderstanding had occurred between them. Consequently, Calvin is at pains, from the beginning of this letter, to assuage any offence Knox may have gained. This he does by giving high praise of Knox's character.[17] The letter concludes with these beautiful words of exhortation and comfort:

Farewell, distinguished sir and honored brother. May the Lord always stand by you, govern, protect, and sustain you by his power. Your distress for the loss of your wife justly commands my deepest sympathy. Persons of her merit are not often to be met with. But as you have well learned from what source consolation for your sorrow is to be sought, I doubt not but you endure with patience this calamity. You will salute very courteously all your pious brethren. My colleagues beg me to present to you their best respects.[18]

This same concern for the welfare of Knox is seen also in Calvin's letters to others.[19] Concern, not only, but also his esteem of Knox's preaching, doctrine and dedication. In a letter to the Earl of Arran, Calvin writes:

I praise God, likewise, Monseigneur, for the care and holy desire which you manifest that the pure doctrine of the gospel should be preached in your nation. To which duty I doubt not but our brother, Master Knox, will willingly dedicate his services, as indeed he has already shown.[20]

And indeed, Calvin's esteem expands to include the writings and scholarship of the Scottish Reformer. In the Epistle Dedicatory to his Sermons on Election and Reprobation he says:

For further satisfaction in this question, I refer all christians to the books that are written hereof, and namely to these excellent Sermons: M Knox hath learnedly answered the objection of the adversaries in a Book printed at Geneva.[21]

High praise, indeed, from the prince of exegetes, exemplary scholar and leading Reformer. Praise which shows that Calvin and Knox shared a mutual respect and love for each other. Concluding Remarks

In this brief overview, we have seen just a little of the relationship that existed between the leading Scottish and Genevan Reformers. They did have their differences. And, at times, these differences led to a degree of anger and the speaking of harsh words. But these two men had a firm conviction of, and belief in, the fundamental, central issues of the Gospel which, under God, they were instrumental in teaching and preaching. It was this that cemented their relationship "this love for the full-orbed Gospel, and desire to teach and preach it.

We who love the truth of God's Word, as it is found in the fundamental, essential doctrines of the Scriptures, ought to learn from Calvin and Knox. Let us roll up our sleeves and work for the cause of God and His kingdom in these areas of faith that are most firmly believed among us. Let us have a high regard and love for each other, who hold the truth

uncompromisingly. Let us, by God's grace, be Knoxes and Calvins in our love and esteem for the truth and for all who hold the truth.

Rev. D. Higgs FOOTNOTES1. Cf Calvin, Selected Works, Vol 6, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983, p 37, note 1.

2. Particularly this occurred in Helvetia, part of modern day western Switzerland, and the region from which the First and Second Helvetic Confessions of Faith are named.

3. Knox, Works, Vol 3, Edinburgh: Laing Edition, 1854, p 235.

4. McCrie, T, The Life of John Knox, Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1976, p 71.

5. Ibid.

6. Cecil was the secretary to Queen Elizabeth I, of England.

7. Calvin, Selected Works, Vol 7, p 47.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid, p 48.

10. The problem concerned Knox's desire to reform the worship at Frankfort. He and Calvin agreed on the principles, but Calvin advised caution nonetheless.

11. Cf Selected Works, Vol 6, pp 189-191, and especially Vol 7, pp 183-185.

12. Knox, Works, Vol 3, p. 201. For similar praise cf, e.g., Vol 4, pp 41 and 161. Also, consult Knox's letter to Calvin, Vol 6, pp 133-135, where can be seen his great respect for Calvin, and desire for Calvin to advise him, as there is no other's advice which he esteems so highly.

13. Ibid, Vol 4, p 240.

14. It must be noted that this letter was written after the one to Cecil, in which Calvin expressed his anger at Knox. The letter to Cecil was written in May of the same year: Knox and Calvin had obviously talked this matter out to their mutual satisfaction.

15. Selected Works, Vol 7, p 73.

16. Ibid, p 76.

17. Cf ibid, Vol 7, pp 183-184.

18. Ibid, p. 185.

19. Cf a letter to Goodman which shows Calvin's sympathy on hearing of the death of Knox's wife (ibid, pp 185-186).

20. Ibid, Vol 6, p 455.

21. Calvin, Sermons on Election and Reprobation, Audubon, New Jersey: Old Paths Publications, 1996, p xxviii.

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