John Knox’s Theology of Political Government

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Basic to Knox’s thought on political government was the concept of the covenant, as set forth in the Old Testament. In this he followed Calvin and perhaps Beza, but carried their ideas to a more complete statement and application. During his sojourn in Geneva he apparently worked on the idea, and on his return to Scotland in 1559, sought to have it put into effect: a Protestant country was a covenanted country, and its rulers—the king/queen and subordinate magistrates—and people were to obey God’s law in all political matters. This view had considerable influence in Scotland and England into the nineteenth century. It may also have exercised an influence on European and American political thought.

The use of the term “covenanter” in Scottish church history often gives readers the impression that those who resisted the Stewart attempts to Anglicize the Church of Scotland were the originators of the term. The signing of the covenant in 1638 is frequently viewed as the beginning of a new approach to political thinking in Scotland. Such, however, is not the case; as one looks back to the Protestant Reformation one finds that John Knox developed the doctrine of the covenant very clearly, not just as a theological concept, but also as a political theory. His view was that Scotland, having accepted the Reformation, had become a “covenanted nation” in much the same way as Israel in Old Testament times.

We must, however, recognize that Knox was not primarily a political thinker or theorist. Basically, as he admitted, he was a “poor preacher of the Gospel” who was seeking to bring about a religious reformation and revival in Scotland. Therefore, while he had considerable to say on the subject of political theory, he did so only as politics impinged on his reforming activity. And when he did have something to say on the subject he took his stand on a fundamentally Calvinistic theology. In so doing, he also looked to Calvin’s idea of the government of a political state as described in the last chapter of The Institutes of the Christian Religion. Yet he carried Calvin’s political thinking farther than the Genevan reformer had done. While Calvin had set forth the view that subordinate magistrates had the right to help govern a country and even control its ruler, Knox sought to implement Old Testament covenant thinking by setting up a covenanted nation in which even the “commonalty” had a say in government. In this, as J. W. Allen

states, "he cannot but be regarded as one of the chief personal factors in the history of political thought in the sixteenth century."

Knox's political views were not entirely novel. Jacques Almain, for instance, in 1512 had posited the view that since royal authority came from the community, the king was obligated to rule for the communal good. More important was the work of the reformer Theodore Beza who as early as 1554 had stated, in his work on the duty of the magistrate to punish heretics, the idea of the right of the inferior magistrate to control and if necessary remove a ruler. Echoes of this thinking can also be found in his Confession of Faith, published in 1558. While Knox undoubtedly knew these works and probably had discussed this whole matter of politics with Beza, there were also English refugees in Geneva who, having fled Mary Tudor's persecution, developed democratic ideas based on what has been called a private law argument: if rulers were oppressive they were no longer under the ordinance of God and so were not legitimate rulers. The two most important writers in this context were John Ponet, who in 1556 published his pamphlet A Short Treatise of Political Power, and Christopher Goodman, whose work How Superior Powers Ought to be Obeyed appeared in 1558.

Whether Knox knew Ponet's work is uncertain. He may have discussed the idea with the bishop before they both had to go into exile on Mary's accession; but Ponet's work was published in Strasburg, and there seems to be little evidence that it was known to Knox. Goodman, on the other hand, was one of the leading members of Knox's congregation in Geneva, so it is likely that the two men had discussed the idea of the covenant before Goodman's book was published. Goodman probably received some of his ideas on the covenanted nation from Knox, who had already developed his own idea of the covenanted nation some years before. Quentin Skinner has pointed out the similarity in the thinking of these three men, but he has not indicated that Knox had been working out his covenant ideas before either Ponet's or Goodman's books came off the press.

Another influence which had its impact on Knox's thinking was ecclesiastical conciliarism, which had gained very considerable support in

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Scotland. Scots had given their support to councils such as that at Basel in the preceding century, and one of the great advocates of conciliarism had been John Major who may have taught Knox at Saint Andrew's. In his commentary on Matthew (1518) and his History of Greater Britain (1521), Major set forth arguments in favor of conciliarism very clearly. Added to this was the Scottish practice of establishing bands of manrent and maintenance in which nobles would agree to stand together against all enemies except the king. This was the basis upon which Protestant nobles or “Lords of the Congregation” drew up their agreement in 1557 to work for the reform of the church in Scotland.

Thus when Knox carried Calvin’s political views somewhat farther than the latter wished, he was not really introducing ideas which were entirely new. Rather, he brought various trends of Protestant thinking together and succeeded in applying them to Scotland, where the rulers were strongly opposed to the Reformation.

The Development of Knox’s Thought

There have been various ideas as to the origins of Knox’s view of the covenant. Some believed it was fundamentally a Zwinglian concept; others have thought it derived from Calvin’s teachings; while again others thought that Knox moved from Zwingli to Calvin. The concept of a gradual development may have much to be said for it, but Knox took Calvin’s idea of the covenant between God and the individual and carried it over into the political field with the view that there was a covenant also between God and a faithful, believing people. This view developed only gradually, however, as Knox faced political changes and the demands of new situations. For example, while he was in Saint Andrews Castle, he did not express much about the covenant concept. Also, when Knox wrote his comments on Balnave’s statement of faith while he was a galley slave, the covenant was not considered.


It was only after his release from the French galley and his crossing over to England that the covenant idea began to take shape. With the accession of Edward VI to the English throne in 1547 and Cranmer’s rise in importance, England began to see radical religious changes take place. The two Books of Common Prayer (1549 and 1553) coupled with the Forty-Two Articles of Religion (1551) officially made England a Protestant country. Knox did not always agree with England’s type of Protestantism; he nevertheless felt that England had now officially become a Protestant country, and therefore was a covenanted country which had promised to serve God in much the same way that Israel made the same promise at Mount Sinai.

The accession of Mary Tudor to the throne changed all this. By repudiating what Edward had done in bringing about religious change, Mary effectively destroyed the nation’s covenant relation with God. It was at this point that Knox began to consider seriously the implications of Mary’s breaking of the covenant. In his exposition of the Sixth Psalm he laments the developments which had taken place in England and also apologizes for having fled the country. At the same time he wrote A Godly Letter of Warning to the Faithfull in London, Newcastle and Berwick, in which he presented his views on the situation which then prevailed under Mary. He pointed out that between God and his people there is a league or covenant in which the latter promise to have nothing to do with idolatry, and because all Christians are in the league they must all follow the principle of Deuteronomy 13 which required condivg punishment upon all who would lead Israel to break the covenant by idolatrous worship. And this applied not merely to individuals but to a nation such as England which had entered this covenant relationship. Knox felt that Mary should be removed for what she had done when she restored the idolatry of the mass. Although he called for a Jehu or a Phineas, he did not seem to hold that an individual had the right to act as executioner.9

After he had dispatched these two pamphlets to the English Protestants, Knox set off for Geneva with some questions for Calvin concerning the matter of political rulers. When he met with the Genevan reformer he posed these queries: (1) whether the son of a king, a minor, is upon succession to be regarded as a lawful magistrate and to be obeyed as of divine right; (2) whether a woman can rule and transfer her rights to a husband; (3) whether magistrates enforcing idolatry are to be obeyed, and whether authorities holding towns by force can resist; and (4) whether Christians may support a religious nobility resisting an idolatrous ruler. Calvin reported to Bullinger

9Knox, “A Godly Letter to the Faithful in London, Newcastle and Berwick” (1554), The Works of John Knox ed. D. Laing, (Edinburgh: 1864), 3:184 ff; Kyle Mind of Knox, 200 ff, 253 ff. The date of Knox’s letter indicates that he had already formulated his covenant theory before meeting Calvin, and four years before Goodman’s work dealing with the same subject was published.
that he had given only verbal answers. Knox then moved on to Zurich where he presented the same questions to Bullinger who apparently replied in somewhat the same vein as had Calvin, but in writing. Knox also consulted others, but we do not know their replies. Bullinger explained to Calvin what he had said, and it is obvious that he was very cautious about this whole matter. Neither he nor Calvin were prepared to support subversive, rebellious actions.  

All this was of little help to Knox for he was faced with the fact that Mary was putting pressure on the English Protestants to return to the Church of Rome, eventually using such persecution that Protestants who were unwilling to submit were forced to leave the country, as Knox had done earlier. The churchmen who went into exile generally went to Strasburg, while lay people who may not have been in favor of the pattern of church established in England moved to other continental cities. Of the latter group a considerable number moved to Frankfurt where they established an English congregation of which Knox became the pastor. When the bishops in Strasburg moved in and took over the Frankfort church, Knox and some two hundred of the congregation left and moved to Geneva, which thus became the home of what was to become English Puritanism. 

While he was minister of the Genevan English congregation, Knox wrote two letters to the Protestants in England. In July of 1554, shortly after his return to Geneva, he composed his Faithful Admonition unto the Professors of God’s Truth in England. In this work he did not seek to stir up rebellion against Mary, but urged submission, except that in matters relating to religion they were to obey God rather than Mary. In this he followed both Calvin and Bullinger. However, he did leave room for the action of some inspired assassin who might deal with Mary! Five years later, in A Brief Exhortation to England, he urged the English to return to the biblical religion which they had accepted under Edward VI; at the same time he pointed out that by accepting Mary they had broken the covenant relationship with God and were, therefore, guilty nationally of rebellion against God. Their only means of purgation would be the removal of Mary who had led them astray. By this time, however, Mary had died and Elizabeth had ascended the throne. 

Meanwhile the situation in Scotland had been changing. James V had died in 1542, to be succeeded by a week-old girl, Mary. The government of the country then passed into the hands of the Earl of Arran, who at first

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favored the Protestant movement. However, after Mary went to France and eventually became the wife of the prince who was to become Francis II, Roman Catholic forces under the leadership of Cardinal Beaton took over and Mary’s mother, Mary of Guise, became regent. As a result, the position of the Protestants was very difficult. Quite a number of the nobles had accepted the Protestant faith and, led by some of the upper nobility, such as the Earl of Argyll and the Earl of Glencairn, they were prepared to take a stand for their beliefs. This tended to restrain any vigorous action by either the civil or the ecclesiastical authorities to suppress Protestantism. It was in this state of affairs that Knox most fully developed his covenantal views.

Specifically, between 1556 and 1559 Knox amplified and applied his covenant ideas in relation to the situation in Scotland. In 1556, while preaching in Scotland, he wrote a letter to the Queen Regent calling for her to reform the church and abolish Roman Catholicism. He said that it was her duty—like Josiah, Hezekiah, or Jehoshaphat—to take action against the idolatry prevalent in the Roman Church, and in so doing she would attain eternal life. Mary, however, passed this off as a sort of joke. Then in the latter part of 1557 Knox published a letter To the Professors of the Truth in Scotland, perhaps partially as a result of his failure to influence Mary. In this he called upon the lords to carry out the work of reforming the church. He warned against rebellion and advised cooperation with the authorities in order to obtain freedom of worship; if the government would not consent, they should make public protestation against all things contrary to the Word of God. Similar letters were sent to individuals calling upon the subordinate magistrates to bring about reforms in the church, resulting in the formation of a band of maintenance, later known as the “Lords of the Congregation.”

In 1558 Knox’s covenant thinking became most fully developed. When faced with an influx of French troops and the possibility of active persecution of Protestants, he found it necessary to take a stronger stand, which meant the possibility of rebellion. In 1556 the clerical authorities in Scotland had excommunicated him and declared him a heretic who should be burned by the civil authorities. Against this Knox appealed to the nobility, pointing out that the sentence was unjust for many reasons. He then went on to show that the nobility, as the subordinate magistrates, had a covenantal duty to prevent injustice and also to reform the church if it deviated from the truth.

To reinforce this contention he cited examples of various Old Testament kings and rulers, as well as examples such as Daniel and the Hebrew children, to show that loyalty to the covenant with God might even require

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13 Knox, Works, 4:69 ff.
disobedience to the monarch, and ultimately resistance by force of arms. As he put it,

it is a thing more than certain, that whatsoever God required of the
civile magistrate in Israel or Juda concerning the observance of the
ture religion during the time of the law, the same dothe he require
of lawfull magistrates professing Christ Jesus in the tyme of the
Gospel.\textsuperscript{15}

This letter was then followed by one to the common people of Scotland,
just in case the nobles failed in their duty. If they did so then the
"commonalty" had a right to take action. They had the right to call upon
their rulers to provide them with true Cristian instruction, but if the rulers
did not do so, they might take action to provide it for themselves and had
the right to defend those who were giving the instruction, even if the ruler
sought to stop them by force. What is more, if the ruler attempted to oppres
the people, they had a right to resit and defend themselves against their
oppressor who would keep them under the domination of Satan.\textsuperscript{16}

These two letters were followed by Knox's most famous communication,
\textit{The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women}. In this
he attacked the idea of women being able to rule over a nation. It was directed
primarily at three women rulers of his day: Catherine de Medici of France,
Mary Tudor of England, and Mary of Guise, regent of Scotland. In this work
there arises also the idea of the covenant in which the rule of a woman
would never be accepted by God. He did, however, modify his views on this
later when dealing with Elizabeth and his own Queen Mary.\textsuperscript{17} Many of his
followers as well as Calvin and Beza were very annoyed at his blast. Yet this
did not silence him, for in 1558 he produced his Second Blast in which he
declared that mere inheritance of a throne did not give one a claim to rule.
Furthermore, no "manifest idolater" should be given any public office in any
realm which has subjected itself to Jesus Christ, nor can oath or promise
bind subjects to obey a tyrant who is against God and his truth. Last and
most important of all, if anyone had been promoted to a position of ruler
and then proved himself "unworthie of regiment above the people," those
who had chosen him could "depose and punishe him."\textsuperscript{18} Here the covenant
relationship and its implications appear quite clearly. Finally, he issued an
addition to his letter to the Queen Regent since she had despised his first
letter. He pointed out that in the Old Testament kings who had ignored the

\textsuperscript{15}Knox, \textit{Works}, 4:468 ff.
\textsuperscript{16}A Letter to the Commonalty of Scotland," Knox, \textit{Works}, 4:52 ff; Allen, \textit{Political Thought},

\textsuperscript{17}Knox, \textit{Works}, 4:349 ff; 6:45 ff; Burns, "Knox and Revolution," 256 ff; Allen, \textit{Political

warnings of God’s prophets had suffered disaster as punishment, so Mary ought to beware lest her ignoring of the teachings of the scriptures and continued support of Romanism would cause her to suffer the same fate.\textsuperscript{19}

That Knox’s covenant views received general support among the Protestants appears in a number of ways. In July 1559 the nobles, feeling that the mint was being improperly used by Mary and her supporters, moved in and seized the coining irons. When the regent protested, they said that they had a right to do so as the nobles of the land. Following this, in October a group of Protestant nobles met in the Edinburgh Tolbooth to discuss Mary of Guise’s deposition as regent since she had not heeded their demands for French troops to be removed from the country. To help them make their decision they called in Knox and his colleague John Willock. The latter maintained that even though God had established or appointed the magistrate, that official could be removed for just cause, and the nobles could be God’s agents in so doing. With this Knox agreed, but pointed out that the evil of the Queen Regent should not withdraw the hearts of the people from obedience to their sovereigns. Furthermore, if Mary were deposed for improper reasons the nobles would receive God’s punishment; and if Mary should repent of her failure to rid the country of the French forces she should be allowed back into office. With this the nobles agreed, but then they proceeded to cite Mary’s abuse of power and attempts to suppress Protestantism for which causes they declared her removed from office, claiming their right as “The Nobility and Commouns of the Protestants of the Churche of Scotland.”\textsuperscript{20}

Two documents which were presented to the Estates in the following year show that the Protestant clergy favored such an understanding of the rights and duties of the subordinate magistrate. The first was the \textit{Confession of Faith}. Following the idea of the covenant, the Estates were called upon to ratify the confession, making Scotland a covenanted nation. When one turns to the section on the civil magistrate the reasons for such action become quite clear. The civil magistrate is ordained by God and must be loved and honored by his subjects:

\begin{quote}
moreover to Kings, Princes, Rulers and Magistrates we affirm that chiefly and most principally the conservation and purgation of the Religion appertains.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

The Parliament adopted the confession without too much difficulty. But when the second document, \textit{The Book of Discipline}, was presented, opposition

\textsuperscript{19}Knox, \textit{Works}, 4:438 ff.

\textsuperscript{20}Knox, \textit{History}, 1:199, 249 ff.

was strong. The book set forth views that the civil authorities were to establish and maintain Protestantism, were to remove Roman Catholics from political office, were to work with the church to establish and maintain discipline, and were to set up Protestant public schools. The one provision which caused trouble was that the revenues of the old church, many of which were now in the hands of the nobility, were to be used for the support of the Protestant clergy. This brought opposition from many nobles, even Protestants, despite the fact that the Secret Council had already approved it. As a result, Parliament refused to ratify the Book of Discipline, but the church proceeded to use it despite the civil authority's disapproval. In both cases, however, it was clear that Knox's view of Scotland as a covenanted nation was accepted without question by his supporters.

The nation was now officially Protestant and so a covenanted nation, and Knox does not seem to have said much more on the subject. He had other duties more relevant to his evangelization of the country, which he considered more important. However, he did present a defense of the action of the Estates and pointed out that the meeting of 1560 was the freest and best attended Parliament in years. It was, therefore, quite legal even though Queen Mary was in France at the time. Mary, however, refused to ratify the Estates' action, and when she returned in August of 1561 it was clear that she would undermine the establishment of Protestantism if she could. The result was that Knox had debates with both her and her supporters. On three occasions he was summoned to her presence because of things he had said in his sermons. Each time, he was prepared to acknowledge her authority as queen, but he insisted that she was as much subject to God's law in scripture as any one of her subjects. Consequently, she was required—in her covenant position as ruler—to obey that law and to maintain the true preaching of the Gospel. If she failed to do so and sought to prevent the people's instruction in the truth she could be resisted, even by force. In the 1564 General Assembly he maintained the same position in a debate with Maitland of Lethington, insisting that it was quite within the Christians' right to remove an idolatrous ruler. This position he reiterated and carried farther after Mary's husband, Henry Darnley, was murdered and she married the Earl of Bothwell, who, it was generally believed, was responsible for Darnley's death. Knox then demanded that Mary be deposed and executed.

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23Knox, History, 1:34-35; Kyle, Mind of Knox, 281-82; Reid, Trumpeter, 215-16.
26Knox, History, 1:lxxv.
Knox believed, first of all, that for both civil and ecclesiastical government to be true governments they must be obedient to God as he has revealed himself in holy scripture. He believed that a nation which—like England or Scotland—had publicly and officially accepted the Gospel had become a covenanted nation. This meant that both state and church must obey divine law. This was what one might call a theocratic view of the state, but not an ecclesiocratic view. Church and state were to be separate, each directly responsible to the sovereign God. True, preachers should have the freedom to preach the Gospel and apply it to matters political, as Knox did on occasion when criticizing Mary. On the other hand, the church could not dictate to the magistrate. At the same time, the role of the state was limited with regard to the church. It was to support the true faith and suppress idolatry. It was to act as a higher court of appeal from a corrupt church, always of course with the proviso that the members who were appealing could reject the state’s decisions if they were contrary to Scripture. The state was also responsible for the financial support of the church, and for the punishment of vices repugnant to God as well as for crimes. All this, however, would be possible only if the magistrates were godly. If they were not they should be removed either by those who had appointed them or by the people in general.

Knox’s Political Influence

What was Knox’s influence in his own day? To answer this question one may look to the Continent, where he had some impact on the views of the French Huguenots. It is very probable that he had contacts in Geneva with some of the leading Protestant thinkers such as Francis Hotman, Hubert Languet, and Philippe du Plessis-Mornay. It is also probable that he attended the meeting at Poitiers which produced the first French plan for church organization (1557). With these contacts in view, therefore, he may have had considerable influence on the political ideas expressed in such works as the anonymous Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos (1579), perhaps written by Languet. It may well be, therefore, that his influence extended more widely than the British Isles. One also cannot but wonder if he had some impact in the Netherlands whither a good many Scottish soldiers went to fight the Spaniards as the troops of William of Orange.


That he did have considerable influence in England is quite clear. He undoubtedly gave his support to those who favored a purification of the Church of England from "the rags of popery." And the Puritans of the seventeenth century fell in readily with his covenant ideas, for they were willing to accept the same views of the state as a covenanted people, which they expressed in both the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Westminster Larger Catechism.\(^{30}\)

Most obvious of all, however, was Knox's influence on the Scottish scene. The first Book of Discipline had been a little hazy on this matter of the state; the second book, however, was largely influenced by Andrew Melville and set forth the covenant idea very clearly. Thus it became the basis for resistance to the attempts of James VI/I and Charles I to control the church. In the seventeenth century the Scottish Parliament submitted to the English Parliament "The Solemn League and Covenant" which the latter body ratified in 1643, thus bringing the two countries together for the reformation of society and the church. The covenant idea was also expressed in the documents of the Westminster Assembly (1642-48), largely through the influence of Samuel Rutherford and the other Scottish delegates. Rutherford himself had presented the covenant doctrine in his work Lex Rex, which had a great impact on Scottish thinking and was basic to the whole covenanting movement during the latter part of the century, until the fall of the Stewart dynasty.\(^{31}\) In the next two centuries the covenant idea continued to influence the thinking of men such as Ebenezer Erskine, Thomas Gillespie, Thomas Chalmers, and many others. The Free Church of Scotland's view on church establishment down to the present day is evidence of the influence of the covenant idea. The Constitution of the United States bears something of its impact, probably through the influence of John Witherspoon, a Scottish minister, president of Princeton University, and a member of the Continental Congress. The phrase "one nation under God" expresses well the covenant view of John Knox.

In Knox's view of the covenanted nation, we see a basic opposition to any government which would give absolute power to a ruler, whether an individual or a parliament or a congress. His desire was for a nation—its rulers and their subjects—to recognize that the ultimate authority is God, who must be obeyed. This is based on the fact that whether the rulers or the people recognize it or not, they are in a covenant relationship with God. The rulers have in fact a covenant to rule for the benefit of the people and for the glory

\(^{30}\)The Confession of Faith (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1957), chap. 23; Larger Catechism, Questions 124 ff.

of God, while the people are to obey their rulers for their own benefit and likewise to the glory of God. If the rulers fail in their duty, the people can remove them; if the people fail, the rulers cannot change the situation, but the church must seek to bring the nation back to true obedience. If this proves impossible, only divine judgment and punishment can result.