

Heirs of the Reformation

1 Peter 2:4-10

Scottish Service

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So the British bookmakers or “bookies” are having a field day with the forthcoming Royal nuptials, offering the possibility of making a little money on all the uncertain details: Where the wedding of William and Kate will be held. When it will be held. Where the reception will take place. The colour of the Queen’s hat. Where the couple will go for their honeymoon. You can even bet, if you are a betting person which, of course, none of us being Presbyterians could ever be, on what name the Kate Middleton will choose after the marriage – the informal “Kate” or the formal “Catherine” more befitting a royal personage.¹

A letter to the editor of one newspaper thinks that the future Mrs. Wales would be making a mistake by changing her name. “Sir,” the letter reads, “Catherine has not been a propitious name for English queens. Of Henry VIII’s three Catherines, one was divorced, one beheaded and one died in childbirth a couple of years after his death. Catherine of Braganza failed to give Charles II an heir and suffered the constant humiliation of his many infidelities. Catherine of France, wife of Henry V, fared a little better; although she was widowed very soon after her marriage, the Tudor dynasty was descended from her. I suggest that Miss Middleton stick with Kate.”²

Amidst all the uncertainties, one thing we do know for sure is that Prince William and Kate Middleton met at St. Andrew’s University in Scotland in 2001 with both graduating together in 2005.³ And that is something that, of course, will put this little-known east coast Scottish town well and truly on the map for evermore. “St. Andrew’s?” people will say in the future, when William is King and Kate is Queen, “Oh, yes, that’s where the royal romance all began.”

Of course, I am just being a little sarcastic. St. Andrew’s is famous for more than that. Principally, of course, it is the university where one of Peterborough’s and St. Paul’s finest, Major the Rev. Donald Howson studied. Then we mustn’t forget there’s a nice little links golf course there where the likes of Jack Nicklaus, Sevie Ballesteros, John Daly and Tiger Woods have excelled in times past – despite the wind and the rain from the north sea and the incessant noise of the tornado jets landing at the nearby airbase.

St. Andrew’s claim to fame, though, is much more than royalty or golf. It is also the place where the Scottish Reformation really started back in the 16th century. And that is because one John Knox just happened to study at St. Andrew’s University and, in the process, fell into the wrong, or maybe it was the right, company.

Although the Scottish Reformation dates back to the mid 1500s, in actual fact the winds of ecclesiastical change had been blowing in Scotland, England and across Europe for decades if not centuries beforehand. Many priests and teachers were deeply upset with the mediaeval Roman Catholic Church’s teaching and practices – the claims of papal infallibility, the belief that salvation was only possible through the catholic church, the Doctrine of Transubstantiation, the neglect of New Testament teaching, the sale of indulgences – not to speak of the widespread abuses that were taking place in churches and monasteries in country after country.

These priests and teachers were also very attracted by what they were hearing from German and Swiss reformers such as Luther, Calvin and Zwingli – reformers who were teaching that the true way to salvation was not through the church but through justification by faith; that the change in the sacramental elements was not a material one but a spiritual change; that Jesus, not the Pope, was the one true head of the church.

Now, it so happened that John Knox, while studying, teaching and ministering in St. Andrew’s from the 1520s to the 1540s, was strongly influenced by two outspoken religious reformers, Patrick Hamilton and George Wishart⁴ – both of whom were not afraid of denouncing the papacy and popularising the new teachings of the German and Swiss Reformers, Luther, Calvin and Zwingli. In time, both fell foul of the ecclesiastical authorities in St. Andrew’s and were publicly burned at the stake in the middle of the town. What a traumatic experience for John Knox who was almost certainly present when both his friends were executed in such horrible fashion!⁵

After Hamilton and Wishart died, Knox led quite an adventurous life. He served as chaplain to other protestant sympathisers; was captured by French soldiers; was sentenced to hard labour in the galleys of French ships; was exiled in England, then to Germany and Switzerland; studied under John Calvin; ministered to refugee congregations; before returning to Scotland where, at last, the time was right for change. In the year 1560, a group of protestant nobles, called the Lords of the Congregation, was able to provide the political and military muscle to help the religious reformers, under the leadership of Knox, bring into effect the revolution that disenfranchised the Roman Catholic Church and established in its place the church that was to become the Church of Scotland.

So this year, as well as being the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Knox, is also the 450th anniversary of the Scottish Reformation – an event that ultimately played out

in the capital, Edinburgh, but had its roots very firmly in St. Andrew's, 50 miles to the north.

Now, these events do not just constitute another dusty page in the annals of history. They are of real relevance to us as Protestants and Presbyterians because we are Heirs of the Reformation. We are the direct beneficiaries today here in Canada of all that was achieved back then by martyrs and forerunners in the faith – in terms of our religious liberties, our theological understanding and the re-formation of the church into one that is more clearly in line with God's will and purpose.

There is so much that we take for granted about our church today, so much we never question or appreciate, because it's "always been that way", as long as we can remember. We forget, though, that so many of the aspects of our present day church were only achieved at a price. By the likes of Patrick Hamilton, George Wishart and, particularly, by John Knox, who was inspired by their reforming zeal.

Take, for instance, the fact that our church today is Bible-centred. We assume that it was always thus. But not so. The people of Knox's day experienced a church that focused principally on the sacraments and were only able to learn of God's word in scripture as mediated through the interpretation of the local priest. But Knox's achievement was quite simply to take the Bible out of the control of an autocratic clergy and put it back in the hands of the people.⁶ He told them that they did not need the Church to tell them what the Bible said. Although ministers could help them understand, if they read the Good Book themselves, then God would speak to them directly and individually. By the working of the Holy Spirit God would make clear to them his plan of salvation for them.⁷

Then we must remember that it is to John Knox and the Scottish Reformation that we owe the fact our church today is people-centred. That the lay people of the church have an equal role in decision-making along with the clergy. In pre-Reformation times, as still today, the Roman Catholic Church was run from the top down. Decisions were handed down from popes, cardinals, bishops and priests to the ordinary people who were only allowed to play a supporting role. But the Reformers emphasised again and again the Doctrine of the Priesthood of All Believers, as outlined in the First Letter of Peter: "But you are the chosen race, the King's priests, the holy nation, God's own people, chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God, who called you out of darkness into his own marvellous light."⁸ And this has issued forth in the democratic structure of ecclesiastical polity which we enjoy today as the people govern the church in equal partnership with the ministers, in kirk sessions, presbyteries and general assemblies, rather than having decisions handed down from the church hierarchy.

Then also, Knox emphasised the central importance of the church caring for others and doing it in an organised way – just as the early church had done when the believers all shared their belongings, so that no-one would be in

need.⁹ Inspired by such selfless acts, Knox helped devise the parish system in the Church of Scotland and charged the ministers, elders and members with the task of looking after the poor within the bounds of their own particular area.

This, of course, led church leaders of later times, both in Scotland and here in Canada, to pioneer welfare systems for the hungry and homeless, and take the initiative in building hospitals and homes for the elderly. The imperative for this came directly from their roots back in the Reformed teachings of John Knox. They were absolutely convinced that it was their personal Christian responsibility to care for others by sharing what they had and to do it – not in haphazard fashion as the whim might take them – but in a planned, organised fashion. And we, of course, in St. Paul's, in our times, endeavour to do the very same in similar ways such as our community kitchen.

So we today in *The Presbyterian Church in Canada* are truly heirs of the Reformation. We are the beneficiaries of so much that was achieved 450 years ago in a far off time. But if we would truly treasure this legacy, then we must seek to be reformers in our own times. It was never the intention of the Reformers back then that the work of constructive change would stop with them. Rather, they believed that the church must continually seek to reform itself. *Reformata sed semper reformanda* was the Latin phrase they used. "Reformed but always in the process of being reformed."

So as Heirs of the Reformation, we today must also be reformers, seeking to discover how in the challenging times in which we live, we can reform our church to better serve God's will and better equip it for its mission in today's world. How can we reform our worship to make it more meaningful? How can we reform our mission to give it a greater cutting edge in today's society? How can we reform our church life to make it more appealing? How can we reform our fellowship to make it more inclusive? How can we reform our spiritual life to make it richer and more satisfying? How can we reform our service to the community to serve more effectively the needy in our community? As a 21st century reformer, how would you meet this challenge?

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St. Paul's Presbyterian Church

Peterborough, Ontario

¹ "Royal wedding planning attracts bookmakers", www.cbc.ca

² Susan Kelly, "Best to stick to Queen Kate", *The Times*, November 17, 2010, p. 33

³ Greg Bianchi, "St. Andrew's Pair To Wed", *The Edinburgh Journal*, 20 November 2010

⁴ Matt Perry, *Quodlibet Journal*: Volume 6 Number 1, January - March 2004

⁵ If you ever go to St. Andrew's, you will see the initials of the Patrick Hamilton set in stone on the street at the place where he was put to death outside St. Salvator's College as well as the large and imposing Martyrs Memorial on the very spot where Wishart died.

⁶ In his book, *The Faith of John Knox*, Professor James McEwen says Knox gave the Bible back to the people; and gave it not merely by

placing a book in their hands, but rather by supplying them with a key to understanding, and practical guidance for their study of it. James S. McEwen, *The Faith of John Knox*, Lutterworth Press, London, 1961, p.36

⁷ 1 Corinthians 2:12, "We ... have received the spirit sent by God, so that we may know all that God has given us."

⁸ 1 Peter 2:9

⁹ Acts 2:4; 4:32