

JOHN KNOX'S COVENANT VIEWS (2)

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Introduction

In the previous article we looked at what Knox wrote about the covenant in relation to baptism. We saw that in those writings his doctrine of predestination dominated, so that his view of the covenant, though not fully developed, was there soundly biblical, the emphasis being on the eternal and unbreakable character of that covenant and its establishment with the elect only.

In this article we hope to show that in his other writings, particularly his political writings, he went in another, less biblical direction and expressed views of the covenant that were in conflict with those expressed in his writings on baptism. We believe that this was true because he, in his political writings, was influenced less by his doctrine of predestination than by the peculiar circumstances in which he and the Scottish church of his day found themselves.

The Covenant in Knox's Political Thought

There can be no doubt that Knox's views of the covenant played an important part in his thought on political and social matters. It would be safe to say, we believe, that his doctrine of the covenant, incompletely developed though it may have been, was the dominating element in his views on the calling of the Christian in the world, of the magistrate, and of the citizen in relation to the civil magistrate.

In applying the doctrine of the covenant to these aspects of everyday life, Knox began well. He pointed out that those who are in covenant with God must live in obedience to Him, and that those covenant obligations must take priority over everything else. He defined such covenant obligations especially in relation to idolatry, teaching that the believer's league or covenant with God obliged him to forsake and oppose idolatry in every form. He says, for example:

As it is most profitable for body and soul to avoid idolatry, so is it necessary, that unless so we do, we refuse to be in league with God, we show ourselves to have no faith, and we deny to be witnesses unto God, and to his truth; and so must he, of his Justice, expressed in his word, deny us to be pertain to him or his kingdom (*A Godly Letter of Warning or Admonition to the Faithful in London, Newcastle, and Berwick*, vol. III, p. 190).¹

With this, few would argue.

Due, however, to the political and social circumstances under which Knox ministered, he not only thought of idolatry almost exclusively in terms of false worship, especially Roman Catholic worship, but he carried his views of the Christian's covenant calling in what were, in our view, unacceptable directions. These unacceptable applications of the doctrine of the covenant to everyday life were several.

For one thing, being in covenant with God meant for Knox that every Christian, whether magistrate or citizen, had the obligation to denounce, oppose, suppress, and separate from those who were involved in "idolatry," even family members:

In these words Deut. 13:10-11, 17 most evidently is expressed unto us, why

¹All references to Knox's writings are taken from the six-volume David Laing edition of Knox's works (Edinburgh, James Thin, 1895), but the spellings have been modernized.

God wills that we avoid all fellowship with idolatry, and with the maintainers of the same; in which are three things appertaining to our purpose chiefly to be noted. First, that the Holy Ghost pronounces and gives warning unto us, that maintainers of idolatry, and provokers to the same, intend to draw us from God; and therefore he wills that we neither obey them, be they Kings or be they Queens, neither yet that we conceal their impiety, were they son, daughter, or wife, if we will have the league to stand betwixt God and us. And here is the confirming of my first cause, why it is necessary that we avoid idolatry, because that otherwise we declare ourselves little to regard the league and covenant of God; for that league requires that we declare ourselves enemies to all sorts of idolatry (*A Godly Letter to the Faithful in London*, etc., vol. III, pp. 192, 193).

Nor was this an abstract matter for Knox. As Richard Greaves reminds us, he followed this through in his own family life:

Knox was quite aware that his prospective father-in-law, Richard Bowes, captain of Norham Castle, would conform to Catholicism. The admonition to his fiancée and future mother-in-law was thus harsh: they must accuse Richard Bowes of idolatry because of their covenant obligations.²

These covenant obligations, however, devolved not only on ordinary Christians but also on magistrates and rulers. They especially were obliged by God Himself to put down idolatry, by which Knox meant, as always, false worship and especially the false worship of Rome:

Of which histories (of Josiah and other OT kings, RH) it is evident, that the reformation of religion in all points, together with the punishment of false teachers, does appertain to the power of the civil magistrate. For what God required of them, his justice must require of others having the like charge and authority; what he did approve in them, he cannot but approve in all others who, with like zeal and sincerity, do enterprise to purge the Lord's temple and sanctuary. What God required of them, it is before declared: to wit, that most diligently they should observe his law, statutes, and ceremonies. And how acceptable were their acts to God, he does himself witness II Chron. 32 (*The Appellation from the Sentence Pronounced by the Bishops and Clergy: Addressed to the Nobility and Estates of Scotland*, vol. IV, p. 490).

Knox defended this conclusion on the basis of faulty and contradictory teaching concerning the covenant. As difficult as that may be to harmonize with his teaching elsewhere, that the covenant is established only with the elect, he taught in his political writings, that nations and magistrates are also in covenant with God:

First, it is to be observed, that God's Justice, being infinite and immutable, requires like obedience in matters of religion of all them that be within his league, in all ages, that He requireth of any one nation, or of any particular man in any age before us. For all that are in his league are one body, as Moses doth witness, reckoning men, women, children, servants, princes, priests, rulers, officers, and strangers within the Covenant of the Lord: Then plain it is, that of one body there must be one law; so that whatever God requireth of one, in that behalf, he requireth the same of all. For his Justice is immutable, and what he damneth in any one, the

²Richard L. Greaves, *Theology and Revolution in the Scottish Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Christian University Press: 1980), p. 117.

same he can neither absolve nor excuse in others; for He is righteous without partiality. Then let us search, understand, and consider, what God required of that people, that sometime was in league with him, and what he commanded to be punished amongst them (*A Godly Letter to the Faithful in London*, etc., vol. III, p. 191).

And again:

If any think that this my affirmation, touching the punishment of idolaters, is contrary to the practice of the Apostles, who, finding the Gentiles in idolatry, did call them to repentance, requiring no such punishment: let the same man understand, that the Gentiles, before the preaching of Christ, lived, as the Apostle speaketh, without God in the world, drowned in idolatry, according to the blindness and ignorance in which then they were holden, as a profane nation, whom God had never openly avowed to be his people, had never received in his household, neither given unto them laws to be kept in religion nor polity; and therefore did not his Holy Ghost, calling them to repentance, require of them any corporal punishment, according to the rigour of the law, unto the which they were never subjects, as they that were strangers from the commonwealth of Israel. But if any think, that after the Gentiles were called from their vain conversation, and by embracing Christ Jesus were received into the number of Abraham's children, and so made one people with the Jews, believing: if any think, I say, that then they were not bound to the same obedience which God required of his people Israel, what time he confirmed his league and covenant with them, the same man appeareth to make Christ inferior to Moses, and contrary to the law of his heavenly Father. For if the contempt or transgression of Moses' law was worthy of death, what should we judge the contempt of Christ's ordinance to be?—I mean after they be once received. And if Christ be not come to dissolve, but to fulfill the law of his heavenly Father, shall the liberty of his Gospel be an occasion that the especial glory of his Father be trodden under foot, and regarded of no man? God forbid! (*The Appellation from the Sentence Pronounced by the Bishops and Clergy*, vol. IV, pp. 504, 505).

In that covenant relation with God, according to Knox, it was the duty of the civil magistrate to suppress all idolatry and false worship. Thus, too, it was the covenant, in Knox's theology, which ultimately required the establishment of the true religion by the civil magistrate. And, what is even more significant, it was the failure of the civil magistrate to fulfil those covenant obligations that released the citizen from his obligations to obey and submit to that magistrate.

From the personal obligation to oppose idolatry, Knox concluded that those who are in covenant with God could give no allegiance to a magistrate or ruler who was outside that covenant or who had broken it. Though he had not at first held such views, eventually he came to believe that citizens not only owed no allegiance to, but had the right, even the obligation, to overthrow those rulers who were not in covenant with God and who were supporting and promoting idolatry.

In fact, Knox saw the relationship between citizen and magistrate as itself a covenant, based on the covenant between God and His people. From this it followed almost inevitably that if the magistrate broke his covenant with God, he broke it also with the people, so that they were no longer bound to obey and support him and might rebel and overthrow such a magistrate:

The inviolable preservation of God's religion (which is the Second point) requireth two principal things: the one, That power nor liberty be permitted to any,

of what estate, degree, or authority that ever they be, either to live without the yoke of discipline by God's word commanded; either yet to alter, to change, to disannul, or dissolve the least one jot in religion, which from God's mouth thou hast received. But let his holy and blessed ordinances, by Christ Jesus to his church commanded, be within your limits and bounds so sure and established; that if Prince, King, or Emperor would enterprise to change or disannul the same, that he be of thee reputed enemy to God; and therefore unworthy to reign above his people: yea, that the same man or men, that go about to destroy God's true religion once established, and to erect idolatry, which God detesteth, be adjudged to death, according to God's commandment; the negligence of which part hath made you all (those only excepted whom before I have expressed) murderers of your brethren, deniers of Christ Jesus, and manifest traitors to God's Sovereign Majesty (*A Brief Exhortation to England, for the Speedy Embracing of the Gospel Heretofore by the Tyranny of Mary Suppressed and Banished*, vol. V, pp. 516, 517).

Here, too, he diverged from the views of the covenant expressed in his writings on baptism. Not only did he suggest in his political writings that God's covenant embraced others besides the elect, but he specifically taught that this covenant was breakable and often broken by those magistrates who maintained and promoted idolatrous worship and doctrines, thus contradicting his own teaching in other places that the covenant was permanent and unbreakable.

More importantly, it is in his political writings that Knox tended to view the covenant in terms of a contract, to define the covenant in terms of a formal "league" or compact, and to speak of obedience as a condition to the covenant. Though his use of the word "league" as a synonym for "covenant" may not in other connections have had the idea of a formal compact, it certainly does have that sense when he writes about the duties of magistrates and citizens.

Conclusions

There is, then, a tension in Knox's views of the covenant, a tension which remained unresolved, and perhaps has never been resolved in Scottish theology. This tension seems to us to result from the fact that in his writings on baptism Knox allowed his doctrinal principles, especially the doctrine of predestination, to control his thought. In his political writings, however, the controlling factor was instead the particular political circumstances in which he found himself and his Scotland. Historical evidence supports this. His more extreme views appeared in connection with the accession of Mary Tudor to the throne (his Admonition and Warning was written not long after, and it was there especially that these views began to emerge). So, too, it is clear that his views on the right of citizens to overthrow idolatrous rulers was directed particularly at Roman Catholic Mary and her attempts to restore Romanism in Scotland.

That is only to say, of course, that circumstances rather than principles were the major force in determining the direction of his thought in these areas. Perhaps if Knox's main opponents had been the Anabaptists, with their opposition to the civil magistracy, as was the case on the Continent, he would not have gone in this direction, which in practice at least was not very different from the position of the more radical Anabaptists.

In all of this there is, it seems, a warning for us, for when Knox allowed circumstances to dominate his thought and determine the direction of his thought, his views of the covenant diverged most widely from Scripture itself. Theology must not be done on the street corner as a reaction to events, but in obedience to the Word of God. Practice must be determined by principles, not by

circumstances, for in the latter case, principles will always be manipulated and shaped to fit the direction one has already determined to follow.