

The Mighty
Weakness of

JOHN KNOX

Douglas Bond

A LONG LINE of GODLY MEN



“In the compass of this small volume, Douglas Bond somehow manages to corral all the mysterious paradoxes of John Knox: the thunderous pulpit and the closet intercessions, the soaring intellect and the humble home life, the boldness and the meekness, the might and the weakness. In other words, Bond has captured the very essence of this remarkable model for reformational ministry.”

—DR. GEORGE GRANT
Pastor, Parish Presbyterian Church
Franklin, Tenn.

“I am delighted to recommend Douglas Bond’s latest book, *The Mighty Weakness of John Knox*. Bond has written many, mainly children’s, books on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Scottish church history. He writes with the passion of a man who believes that the church today needs, for its spiritual good and sanity, to learn about the church of yesterday. In choosing to write a book on John Knox, Bond has done the church today a great service. Knox was the towering figure of the Scottish Reformation. In many ways, he was a reluctant hero, conscious as he was of his own weaknesses. However, as the title of the book makes plain, Knox’s sense of weakness was overwhelmed by his sense of God’s greatness. Indeed, as Bond shows us throughout his book, it was Knox’s constant sense of his own weakness that enabled the Lord to use him so mightily in His service. When Knox was asked to account for the wonderful success of the Scottish Reformation, he replied, ‘God gave his Holy Spirit in great abundance to simple men.’ Read this book. Learn from this book. Thank God for men like John Knox. Above all, pray that God would raise up like-minded and like-hearted men in our own day, and once again give His Holy Spirit in great abundance to men who are deeply conscious of their own weakness.”

—DR. IAN HAMILTON
Pastor and professor
Scotland

“Though I love John Knox, I rarely enjoy reading about John Knox. Most biographers leave me feeling like a pathetic worm beside this mighty lion of Scotland. But to my great surprise, this book lifted my spirits and even inspired me. Why? Because Douglas Bond has captured and communicated the secret of John Knox’s power—a genuinely felt and openly confessed weakness that depended daily and completely on the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. Mighty weakness—what an encouraging message for all worms who want to be lions.”

—DR. DAVID P. MURRAY

Professor of Old Testament and practical theology
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Mich.

“Another volume appears in the Long Line of Godly Men Profiles series, this time a profile of John Knox by Douglas Bond. To this very interesting book about a very interesting man, Bond brings his compelling narrative style, honed in his previously written novels. The preface (‘John Knox: A Weak Man Made Mighty’) sets the tone for the volume, as Bond demonstrates in a variety of ways how God took Knox’s several weaknesses to make him one of the Reformation’s strongest figures. Citing Knox’s greatest strength in his submission to Christ, Bond then traces ‘power’ in Knox’s life, whether it be power of prayer, pen, or predestination, or power in Knox’s preaching. For those wondering whether the Pauline mystery of strength in weakness can become true for them, Bond’s portrait of Knox will prove as edifying as it is instructive.”

—DR. T. DAVID GORDON

Professor of religion and Greek (retired)
Grove City College, Grove City, Penn.

The Mighty Weakness of
John Knox

The Long Line of Godly Men Profiles

Series editor, Steven J. Lawson

The Expository Genius of John Calvin

by Steven J. Lawson

The Unwavering Resolve of Jonathan Edwards

by Steven J. Lawson

The Mighty Weakness of John Knox

by Douglas Bond

The Gospel Focus of Charles Spurgeon

by Steven J. Lawson

The Heroic Boldness of Martin Luther

by Steven J. Lawson

The Poetic Wonder of Isaac Watts

by Douglas Bond

The Evangelistic Zeal of George Whitefield

by Steven J. Lawson

The Trinitarian Devotion of John Owen

by Sinclair B. Ferguson

The Daring Mission of William Tyndale

by Steven J. Lawson

The Passionate Preaching of Martyn Lloyd-Jones

by Steven J. Lawson

The Missionary Fellowship of William Carey

by Michael A.G. Haykin

The Affectionate Theology of Richard Sibbes

by Mark Dever

The Bible Convictions of John Wycliffe

by Steven J. Lawson

The Mighty Weakness of John Knox

DOUGLAS BOND



LIGONIER MINISTRIES

The Mighty Weakness of John Knox

© 2011 by Douglas Bond

Published by Ligonier Ministries

421 Ligonier Court, Sanford, FL 32771

Ligonier.org

Printed in Ann Arbor, Michigan

Cushing-Malloy, Inc.

0001223

First edition, first paperback printing

ISBN 978-1-64289-556-8 (Paperback)

ISBN 978-1-56769-255-6 (Hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-64289-557-5 (ePub)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without the prior written permission of the publisher, Ligonier Ministries. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Cover design: Metaleap Creative

Interior design and typeset: Katherine Lloyd, The DESK

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the ESV * Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version *), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The Library of Congress has cataloged the Reformation Trust edition as follows:

Bond, Douglas, 1958-

The mighty weakness of John Knox / by Douglas Bond.

p. cm. -- (The long line of godly men profiles)

Includes bibliographical references (p. 131) and index.

ISBN 978-1-56769-255-6

1. Knox, John, ca. 1514-1572. I. Title.

BX9223.B55 2011

285'.2092--dc22

[B]

2011009264

To my wife

Contents

Foreword: Followers Worthy to Be Followed	xi
Preface: John Knox: A Weak Man Made Mighty.	xiii
1 Knox's Life and Legacy.	1
2 The Power of a Christ-Subdued Life.	25
3 Power of Prayer.	33
4 Power in the Pulpit	47
5 Power of the Pen.	65
6 Power of Predestination	77
7 Empowering the Weak	87
8 A Legacy of Strength.	97
Appendix A: Time Line of John Knox and the Reformation . . .	103
Appendix B: The Scots Confession of Faith	107
Bibliography	131
Index	133
About the Author.	137

Foreword

Followers Worthy to Be Followed

Down through the centuries, God has raised up a long line of godly men whom He has mightily used at critical junctures of church history. These valiant individuals have come from all walks of life—from the ivy-covered halls of elite schools to the dusty back rooms of tradesmen’s shops. They have arisen from all points of this world—from highly visible venues in densely populated cities to obscure hamlets in remote places. Yet despite these differences, these pivotal figures, trophies of God’s grace, have had much in common.

Certainly each man possessed stalwart faith in God and the Lord Jesus Christ, but more can be said. Each of them held deep convictions as to the God-exalting truths known as the doctrines of grace. Though they differed in secondary matters of theology, they stood shoulder to shoulder in championing the doctrines that magnify the sovereign grace of God in His saving purposes in the world. To a man, they upheld the essential truth that “salvation is of the Lord” (Ps. 3:8; Jonah 2:9).

How did these truths affect their lives? Far from paralyzing them, the doctrines of grace inflamed their hearts with reverential awe for God and humbled their souls before His throne. Moreover, the

truths of sovereign grace emboldened these men to further the cause of Christ on the earth. This fact should not surprise us, as history reveals that those who embrace these truths are granted extraordinary confidence in their God. With an enlarged vision of Him, they step forward and accomplish the work of many men, leaving a godly influence on generations to come. They arise with wings like eagles and soar over their times in history. Experientially, the doctrines of grace renew their spirits and empower them to serve God in their divinely appointed hours.

The Long Line of Godly Men Profiles aim to highlight key figures from this procession of sovereign-grace men. It is the purpose of this series to explore how these figures used their God-given gifts and abilities to further the kingdom of heaven. Because they were stalwart followers of Christ, their examples are worthy of emulation today.

In this volume, Douglas Bond introduces to us the Scottish Reformer John Knox. Knox's voice thundered throughout Scotland in a day when the church stood in great need of revival. Despite personal weakness and timidity, Knox was marked by stout faith in Christ. As the Lord empowered Knox's leadership, the Scottish "kirk" became one of the strongest expressions of the kingdom of God the world has ever witnessed. To this day, Knox remains the greatest of all Scots, eminently worthy to be profiled in this series.

As you read this book, may the Lord use it greatly to shape you like Knox, that you too might be one who leaves an indelible influence on this world. May you be strengthened to walk in a manner worthy of your calling.

Soli Deo gloria!

—Steven J. Lawson
Series editor

Preface

John Knox: A Weak Man Made Mighty

John Knox felt toward [Scotland's] idolaters," wrote historian Roland Bainton, "as Elijah toward the priests of Baal."¹ Bainton's comparison of Knox and Elijah is an apt one. Elijah was called, by the express command of God, to draw his sword and cut down 450 deceitful priests of Baal (1 Kings 18:20–40). Men called to be prophets—to do feats such as Elijah was called to do—are not generally touchy-feely, kinder-and-gentler metro males. In redemptive history, the Elijahs have been tortured voices crying in the wilderness, lonely figures called to stand against teeth-gnashing critics, men charged with the profoundly unpopular task of declaring God's Word to people who have taken their stand with the enemies of that Word. Though he was not a biblical prophet, Knox was cast in this mold.

Is it mere hyperbole to say that "Knox was a Hebrew Jeremiah set down on Scottish soil"?² With the zeal of a Jeremiah, Knox thundered against the "motley crowd of superstitions" that infested

1 Roland H. Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (Boston: Beacon, 1952), 181.

2 Mark Galli, "The Hard-to-Like Knox," *Christian History* (Issue 46, Vol. XIV, no. 2, 1995), 6.

religious life in sixteenth-century Scotland, for he considered his country's devotion to such errors to be far worse "than the idols over whose futility Hebrew prophets made merry."³

When God's messengers have mounted the rooftops to decry people's transgressions against Yahweh—Hebrew ones or Scottish ones—the multitudes have responded, not surprisingly, with rancor and violence. Elijah, for example, drew the wrath of Queen Jezebel. For his Elijah-like zeal, Knox is—like his spiritual, theological, and pastoral mentor, John Calvin—"as easy to slander as he is difficult to imitate."⁴ As is the case for any mere man besieged by controversy in turbulent times and called to do significant things that affect the fortunes of many,⁵ critics have found much in Knox to attack.

Hostility and Neglect

In his lifetime, Knox was denounced by regents, queens, and councils, and his effigy was hoisted high and burned at the Mercat Cross in Edinburgh.⁶ Ridiculed as "Knox the knave" and "a runagate Scot," he was outlawed and forbidden to preach by the archbishop of St. Andrews, and orders were issued that he be shot on sight if he failed to comply. Knox did not comply. Years later, a would-be assassin fired

3 Alexander Smellie, *The Reformation in Its Literature* (London: Andrew Melrose, 1925), 245.

4 Theodore Beza, *Life of John Calvin* (London: L. B. Seeley and Sons, 1834), 76.

5 Patrick Fraser Tytler, *The History of Scotland: From the Accession of Alexander III to the Union* (Edinburgh: William P. Nimmo, 1869), 2:355.

6 John Howie, *The Scots Worthies* (1870; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1995), 52.

a shot through a window of Knox's house in Edinburgh, narrowly missing his mark.⁷ Still Knox preached.

What of his legacy since his death in 1572? The English Parliament, 140 years after Knox's death, condemned his books to public burning. In 1739, George Whitefield was ridiculed for preaching "doctrine borrowed from the Kirk of Knox" (*kirk* being the Scottish equivalent of the English *church*). Perhaps more than any other, he has been portrayed as "the enfant terrible of Calvinism,"⁸ and has been characterized in books and film, and at his own house, now a museum, as a "blustering fanatic."⁹ Moderns dismiss him as a misogynist for his untimely treatise against female monarchs and for his unflinching stand before charming Mary, Queen of Scots, denouncing her sins and calling her to repent.

In 1972, the four hundredth anniversary of his death, it was decided that such a man as Knox was an inappropriate subject to commemorate on a Scottish postage stamp. As a crowning blow, the Edinburgh Town Council ordered the removal of the stone marking his grave, relegating his earthly resting place to obscurity under a variously numbered parking stall.¹⁰ In my most recent visit to Edinburgh, the "JK" once legible on a small square marker was obliterated. As faithless Israel resented Jeremiah's prophecy of doom and destruction for her whoredom against the Lord, so, for the most part, Scotland has resented the life and ministry of Knox.

7 Ibid., 56–57.

8 Wayne Martindale and Jerry Root, eds., *The Quotable Lewis* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1989), 365.

9 Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, 180.

10 Iain Murray, *John Knox: The Annual Lecture of the Evangelical Library for 1972* (London: Evangelical Library; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973), 3.

Why John Knox?

However, Knox himself would have been little troubled by such neglect, even hostility. It seems to be an essential quality in truly great men of God that they care far more for the glory of Jesus Christ than for themselves, which is reason enough to examine closely the life of such a man as Knox.

Furthermore, when Knox is stripped of his God-given might and the thundering power of his calling, what remains is a mere mortal, a small man, “low in stature, and of a weakly constitution,”¹¹ one who, when first called to preach, declined, and when pressed, “burst forth in most abundant tears” and fled the room.¹² In this, too, he was like Elijah, who cowered in a hole, feeling sorry for himself and begging God to deliver him from his enemies—even *after* his judgment on the priests of Baal (1 Kings 19:1–8). Yet, by the grace of God, who alone makes weak men strong, Elijah and Knox lived lives that were characterized far more by power and influence than by weakness and obscurity.

The life of Knox, then, is not just for people who like shortbread and bagpipes, kilts and oatcakes. Neither is it just for Presbyterians or people whose names begin with Mac (or who wish they did). Knox is a model for the ordinary Christian, especially the one who feels his own weakness but who nevertheless wants to serve Christ in a troubled world. Knox is eminently relevant to all Christians who have ever been forced to come face to face with their own littleness.

11 Howie, *The Scots Worthies*, 63.

12 John Knox, *John Knox's History of the Reformation in Scotland*, William Croft Dickinson, ed. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950), 1:83.

Who has not felt deep within him that he was too simple a man with too little to contribute to so great a cause as that of Christ and His church? What young woman, wife, mother, grandmother, or aged spinster has not wrung her hands, fearful and weak against the enemies of her soul and the church? Who has not thought that his gifts were too modest, that others could serve far better, and that he was too frail and timid to help advance the gospel of our Lord Jesus? Or who has not felt that he was being unjustly maligned by critics, assaulted by the mighty, mocked and insulted by the influential? So it was for Knox, but as he wrote of the Reformation in Scotland, “God gave his Holy Spirit to simple men in great abundance.”¹³ His contemporary, Thomas Smeaton, said of Knox after his death, “I know not if God ever placed a more godly and great spirit in a body so little and frail.”¹⁴

Contentment with Weakness

The Mighty Weakness of John Knox is intended to be a practical biography. The first chapter is an overview of his life and legacy, while the following chapters investigate how he was transformed from weakness to strength in various dimensions of his character and ministry. These chapters examine Knox as a Christ-subdued man of prayer, as a preacher, as a writer, as a theologian, and as a shaper of worship, education, and public life in sixteenth-century Scotland and beyond.

So pull up your footstool—or wheelchair—and learn from the mighty weakness of John Knox. Take heart, all who have cowered at

13 John Knox, cited in Burk Parsons, preface to *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine, and Doxology*, Burk Parsons, ed. (Lake Mary, Fla.: Reformation Trust, 2008), xv.

14 Ibid.

the enemies of Christ and His gospel. Read Knox's life and resolve with the apostle Paul, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10). Weakness, in Paul's theology of ministry, is an essential prerequisite to being used of Christ. The Almighty is in the business of raising up simple, frail, and little people, and empowering them to be strong in Christ. Though few will be called to champion the cause of reformation in an entire country, Knox's life teaches that the most timid saint becomes a formidable giant when strengthened by the almighty power of God in Christ alone.

I am grateful to Dr. R. C. Sproul, Ligonier Ministries, and Reformation Trust for their unrelenting commitment to getting the gospel right, and for their commitment to this profile series as a way of contributing to that high goal. Dr. Steven J. Lawson, series editor, has set the bar high with his volumes on John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards, and his work has been a source of inspiration and encouragement. I am grateful for his passion and leadership in the profile series.

I am equally grateful for the editorial skill and patience of Greg Bailey, director of publications for Reformation Trust. Greg consistently reflects the grace and beauty of the gospel as he generously misses nothing, and as he sends me back to check this source, recast that sentence, or consider slashing this or that entire paragraph. I have never been so warmly critiqued or so encouragingly scrutinized as when the e-mails started coming thick and fast from Greg. When he must uncoil his editorial whip, it never stings, but always feels as if it is wielded by a friend who never deviates from the ultimate goal of getting the gospel right, which for Greg includes getting every

jot and tittle right. Partnering with him in this volume has been a delightful experience.

The brothers who make up Inkblots, our men's writing gathering, deserve my gratitude for their listening ears and critical comments, especially Doug McComas, the founder of the 'Blots. I am deeply indebted to my mother, Mary Jane Bond, who is the first to read almost everything I write, and who offers valuable proofreading and brings a lifetime of literary experience to her many comments and suggestions. I am also grateful to the Scots-loving Spear family, who read this volume and offered many helpful suggestions.

I am equally grateful to my colleagues at Covenant High School for their encouragement on this volume, and to Dick Hannula and the board for making church history central to our curriculum and for providing me with many opportunities for travel and research that have enriched my appreciation of John Knox.

Above all, I am deeply grateful for my wife, Cheryl, who supported me in writing this volume in many essential and loving ways.

Knox's Life and Legacy

*O Lord Eternal, move and govern
my tongue to speak the truth.*¹

—JOHN KNOX

Ironies began right away for John Knox. It has been said there was “no grander figure in the entire history of the Reformation in [Scotland], than that of Knox.”² Yet he likely was born into a simple working-class family.

Almost nothing is known for certain of his early life, not even his birthday—or his birth year. The only thing historians agree about is that he was born sometime between 1505 and 1514 in Haddington, about seventeen miles east of Edinburgh. Knox wrote nothing about his early years, and the obscurity in which he was raised was such that no one else bothered to record much about it either.³

1 Knox, cited in Murray, *John Knox*, 4.

2 Howie, *The Scots Worthies*, 64.

3 William Croft Dickinson, introduction to Knox, *John Knox's History of the Reformation in Scotland*, 1:xxxii.

Neither do historians agree about where Knox was educated. Some insist that he studied under John Major at the University of Glasgow, while others maintain that he studied at the University of St. Andrews, it being in the ecclesiastic jurisdiction of his birthplace.⁴ Either way, Knox likely was subjected to the popular educational sophistry of the time, which was preoccupied with speculative absurdity along these lines: Will all of a man's toenails clipped throughout his lifetime rejoin the man at the resurrection of his body?⁵

In all likelihood, Knox never completed his degree, perhaps because of such pedagogic nonsense; nevertheless, historical records indicate that he was ordained a priest in his twenty-fifth year. The next years are silent ones, from which he emerges bearing a two-fisted broadsword as a bodyguard for the intrepid preacher George Wishart.⁶

Of his conversion, we are left largely to speculation. Some argue that he was converted under the preaching of the friar Thomas Guiliame in 1543. Knox wrote little about it, though words he uttered on his deathbed hint that a certain biblical text may have been instrumental in his conversion. "Go, read where I cast my first anchor," he said to his attentive wife as he lay dying. She read from John 17:3: "And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."⁷

Knox's world was a turbulent one. There was perhaps no place in sixteenth-century Europe more in need of reformation than

4 Ibid., 1:xxxii.

5 J. H. Merle d'Aubigné, *The Reformation in England* (1853; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), 1:68.

6 Knox, *John Knox's History of the Reformation in Scotland*, 1:69.

7 Howie, *The Scots Worthies*, 63.

Scotland. Iain Murray has described it as “a brutal, backwater kingdom, dominated by covetous, bloated clerics as well as by a corrupt civil power.”⁸ Yet God was providentially at work in this world. John Wycliffe’s Lollards had proclaimed the gospel of Christ in Scotland since the late fourteenth century, and more recently, a zealous young nobleman’s son, Patrick Hamilton, had preached Christ, for which he had been arrested, tried, and subjected to a gruesome six-hour burning before San Salvator’s College in 1528. Martin Luther’s teaching on justification by faith alone was making its way into Scotland by his books and pamphlets.⁹ Devoted smugglers were spiriting English Bibles into Scotland by cartloads, and *sola Scriptura* and the Reformed gospel were penetrating the corrupt universities of the realm. Meanwhile, peasants were singing popular ballads exposing clerical abuses and celebrating gospel truth.¹⁰

Persecution Begins

Medieval churchmen were not amused. There were few “bloated clerics” more corrupt than David Cardinal Beaton of St. Andrews. Beaton was a tyrant “and inquisitor, sumptuous and ruthless, with his guards and his ladies and his seven bastard children.”¹¹ Determined to stamp out the rising tide of Reformation, Beaton influenced the passage of a savage parliamentary act against “damnable opinions contrary to faith and the laws of Holy Kirk.”¹² To give the new policy teeth, on January 26, 1544, Beaton ordered four men hanged for

8 Murray, *John Knox*, 7.

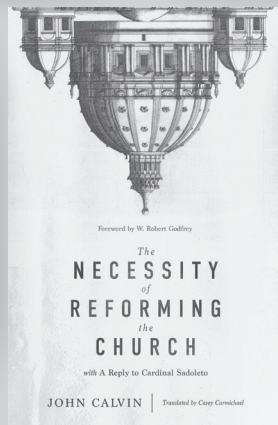
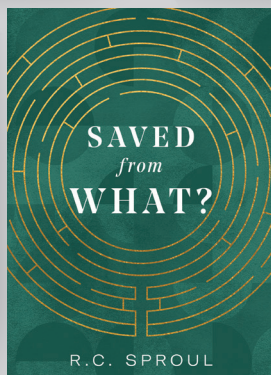
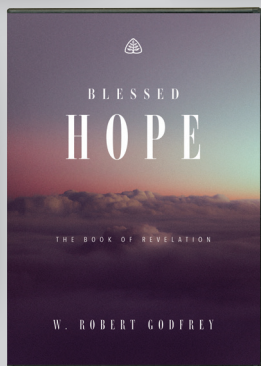
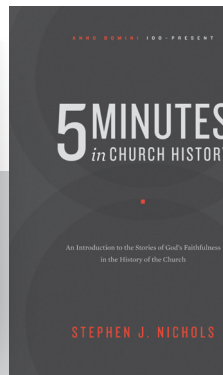
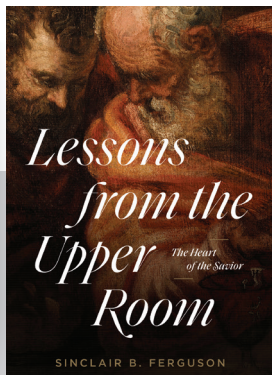
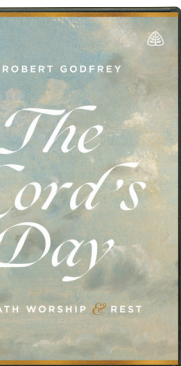
9 Will Durant, *The Reformation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 607.

10 Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, 180.

11 Eustace Percy, *John Knox* (London: James Clarke, 1964), 42.

12 *Ibid.*, 32.

We want to see men and women around the world connect the deep truths of the Christian faith to everyday life.



Order your copy of this title, download the digital version, or browse thousands of resources at Ligonier.org.



LIGONIER MINISTRIES