

CHURCH HISTORY: PORTRAITS OF THE PAST

WEEK 1: INTRO AND JOHN BROWN OF HADDINGTON

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

- “The history of the world,” wrote Thomas Carlyle, “is but the biography of great men.” We all owe much to pioneers—not only those who opened up the New World, but also the veterans of the faith throughout the centuries. Theirs is a story just as exciting...we are the inheritors of a tremendous legacy that has been ill-acknowledged. By this neglect we deprive ourselves of a rich benefit¹
- Jesus said in **Matthew 28:19-20** “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”
- Jesus’ direction to those people would leave an indelible mark on the church seen throughout history.
- There’s the outward preaching of the gospel making converts and the inward teaching to build up the saints.
- Here is the schedule for the upcoming lessons:
 - **June 29th: Introduction and John Brown of Haddington**
 - July 6th: No Adult Fellowship Group (4th of July Holiday)
 - July 13th: John Bunyan, William Gurnall, Anne Bradstreet, and others.
 - July 20th: Smith family the Czech Republic missionary update
 - July 27th: John Newton, William Cowper, Selina Hastings, and others.
 - August 3rd: Music and Composers throughout the history of the church
 - August 10th: Patrick of Ireland, Augustine of Canterbury, George Liele, and others.
 - August 17th: Baker family from Kenya missionary update
 - August 24th: Croatia short term missions update
 - August 31st: No Adult Fellowship Group (Labor Day Weekend)

¹ J. D. Douglas, Philip Wesley Comfort, and Donald Mitchell, *Who’s Who in Christian History* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992).

INTRODUCTION

- Most have heard of Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wycliffe, John Knox, Richard Baxter, B.B. Warfield, etc., but they are not the only people to make important contributions to the history of the church.
- While God certainly has used men in the great arena of the world and allowed them to put His glory on display for all to see...what about the millions of men and women who are never known beyond their own town, their own friends and family.
- I hope to introduce you to some people whom you may never have heard of but have left their mark somewhere in the history of the church.
- **One such man is Lawrence Dow.**
- In one of my favorite books, *The Masculine Mandate*, the author, Richard Phillips, tells of a man, Lawrence Dow, who was a deacon at the church where Phillips is a pastor. Lawrence Dow never had a good formal education, and he worked as a simple doorman at a hotel in downtown Philadelphia and lived in a not-so-nice part of town.
- Lawrence left a legacy that even he could never have anticipated because of his faithful service at the church and from living for the glory of God in his normal, daily life. Not only had he led three future pastors to saving faith in Christ, but he also encouraged and mentored many, many more in his quiet and humble ministry at the church.
- God had used Lawrence in the lives of countless people to show the love of Christ. One of the pastors that he led to faith said of Lawrence, *"It just goes to show what God can do in the life of any man who yields himself unreservedly to Jesus."*
- Lawrence was not a pastor or an elder, he did not have seminary degrees nor was he an influential man in society. But he loved his Lord and Savior and sought only to please him by faithfully pursuing what the Lord had put in front of him day by day.
- Each of us are all called to do the work of ministry in some form, no matter what our stated vocation is on a day-to-day basis. Not every single Christian life and ministry is going to look the same, but they are going to have similar elements no matter what your daily life looks like.
- I tell you this so that you are not discouraged by some of the great things these men and women of faith have accomplished.
- There are going to be more people in heaven that we have never heard of than those whose names are on the covers of books.

THE YEARS BEFORE JOHN BROWN OF HADDINGTON

- Roughly 200 years before John Brown was born, John Knox was born in the area of Haddington, Scotland.
- Through separated by two centuries, God would call and equip both men to stand for the truth and help to solidify the church in Scotland.
- In 1560, in large part to Knox's tenacity, Scotland officially becomes a Protestant country.
- In 1572, Knox was in very poor health and died.
 - At Knox's funeral, the ruler of Scotland said, "**Here lies one who never feared the face of man.**"
- Knox's last words were recorded as:
 - "Come, Lord Jesus. Sweet Jesus, into Thy hand I commend my spirit. Be merciful, Lord, to Thy Church which Thou hast redeemed. Give peace to this afflicted commonwealth. Raise up faithful pastors who will take charge of Thy Church."
- 150 years later John Brown was born in Carpow, Scotland...north of Edinburgh.
- What happened in those 150 years between Knox's death and Brown's birth would help to shape Brown's calling and commitment as he served the Lord.
- "Between **1572** (the death of John Knox) and **1722** (the birth of John Brown of Haddington), the **Church of Scotland** experienced a **tumultuous, complex, and often violent 150 years** of struggle over **theology, worship, church government, and the relationship between church and state**. This period shaped the Presbyterian identity and directly led to the Secession movements that Brown would later serve."²
- While Knox would never say that he set out to start a new church, his desire was merely to reform the church in Scotland, through his influence the Anglican and Roman Catholic Church leadership structure was completely overthrown.
- Knox was a strong supporter in the identity and authority of the local church and that local churches should be led by the presbytery, or in other words, their own elders and pastors.
- Each local presbyterian church would have their own plurality of elders (now called Session) who are elected from among their own church body...rather than bishops who were from the State.
- Each region has their own general meeting together, called a Synod, where each church sends some of their elders to so that each church body is both represented and can have input in church decisions.
- John Knox was the founder of this model, which would be under duress when John Brown came around.

² <https://chatgpt.com/c/68530322-14a8-8002-a05e-e095ec8f6eba>

JOHN BROWN OF HADDINGTON (1722 – 1787)

- Between Knox's death and Brown's birth, Scotland went through a few internal wars and revolutions between the government and the presbyterian churches.
- The government wanted to control what the church did through appointed bishops, but the church wanted to follow Knox's presbyterian rule.
- At the time of Brown's birth, the Church of Scotland was presbyterian in name only, a shell of what Knox had fought for. They had become theologically lukewarm and was in danger of fracturing...which would eventually take place while Brown was a minister.
- "Brown's life and career are even more remarkable considering he began in obscurity and poverty, with no advantages of wealth, position, title, or education. God favored him with unusual gifts and an enormous capacity for hard work as well as a profound experience of the truth of the gospel as "the power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16). That experience left its indelible stamp on every aspect of Brown's many-sided ministry."³
- While there are many providential ways the Lord worked to bring Brown to his role of pastor and seminary teacher, I am only going to highlight a couple.

Brought up with regular teaching of the Word

- Towards the end of his life, Brown wrote "It was a mercy that I was born in a family which took care of my Christian instruction, and in which I had the example of God's worship, both evening and morning – which was the case of few families in that corner at that time. This was the more remarkable that my father, as I have heard, being born under prelacy, got no instruction in reading or next to none, but what he got from masters after he began to be a herd."

Observing others taking communion⁴

- "When Brown was 8 years old, he pushed through a large Sabbath crowd outside the church at Abernethy and discovered that the Lord's Supper was going to be administered...non-communicants were excluded from such services, he was forced to leave but not before he heard a minister who spoke highly of Christ."
- This would have an impact on Brown's later life and ministry.

³ Brown, *Counsel to Gospel Ministers*.

⁴ Quotes taken from the introduction written by Joel Beeke and Randall Peterson of John Brown's *Systematic Theology*.

- In fact, he went on to say, “This in a sweet and delightful manner captivated my young affections and has since made me think that children should never be kept out of the church on such occasions.”

An unlearned orphan child

- “My father dying about the eleventh year of my age, and my mother soon after, I was left a poor orphan, who had almost nothing to depend on but the providence of God.”⁵
- Brown was hired by John Ogilvie to be a shepherd and eventually began to read to him.
- Brown read the Bible to him, sang and prayed as well.
- Through Brown’s very limited schooling and his father’s teaching, he became familiar with reading Latin.
- “His browsing in Latin fields led him to seek the richer pasture of Greek, and acquaintance with the very words of the New Testament.”
- Through overlaying Latin and Greek, he was able to teach himself biblical Greek.
- He did this while being a shepherd of sheep.
- Not only did he learn biblical Greek, he then pushed onto Hebrew.
- After learning the basics of Greek as a teenager, he had his heart set on reading the Greek New Testament.
- While Latin books were common, a Greek New Testament would be costly.
- After saving up some money, at the age of 16, he walked for 24 miles to St. Andrews, which had a university attached to it.
- Going in, he asked the shopkeeper for a Greek New Testament. Brown was not an academic, he did not look like an academic, he was an orphaned shepherder who just walked 24 miles through the night.
- The bookseller, upon hearing Brown’s request said “What would you do wi’ that book? You’ll no can read it.” Brown simply answered, “I’ll try to read it.”
- As this conversation was taking place, some professors from the university came into the shop and overheard this dialogue between Brown and the shop owner.
- The professor, after a short interrogation, asked the bookseller to bring a Greek New Testament. The professor looked at Brown and said, “Boy, if you can read that book, you shall have it for nothing.”
- Brown took the book up, read a portion and astonished the whole shop.
- Brown took his gift, walked 24 miles back to his sheep, sat down and started to read his new prize.

⁵ Mackenzie, *John Brown of Haddington*.

Accused of Being Demon Possessed

- “His marvelous acquaintance with Greek, in his circumstances, simply staggered a few young men in Abernethy who were studying for the ministry”⁶
- Brown, not having the “right” lineage nor the proper job (he was a herdsman), was not looked upon with any favor from the students of the local seminary.
- In fact, the more these students struggled in their studies, the more they began to have Brown.
- The son of a local minister approached Brown and said, “I’m sure the deil [devil] has you some words.”
 - Brown laughed, but it was no joke. Over the course of the next five years, he was labeled as one who used the black arts to learn the languages.
- Witch trials in Scotland, which carried an automatic death penalty, had only been banned about 2 years before Brown was accused of seeking the devil’s help.
- While it was no longer legal in the courts, the church still took it with great seriousness.
- Brown’s church, the Church of Abernethy, did not necessarily expel him from membership for being accused of demon possession, but they did not look upon him with favor.
- It was at this time that the Lord used various situations in Brown’s life to bring him into the ministry.
- Brown was a peddler, a traveling salesman, which would be a common profession for someone of his poor social and economical status.
- But this did something for Brown. It allowed him to have books to sell that he never would have access to because of his lower-class status.
- He also realized, during this time, that the Lord had put a burden upon his heart to preach the gospel and teach God’s people. He knew that he had to get a seminary education to know more about the Scriptures.
- While he still retained his membership at the Church in Abernathy, that church began to shift theologically and allow the state to have control in the church.
- Brown left that church all together and began to attend the Associate Presbytery.
- In 1747 there was a split in the Church of Scotland (the church that Knox fought so hard to bring together), and John Brown joined the Secession Church...or those who broke away from the established church.
- Four men, Ebenezer Erskine, Ralph Eriskine, Alexander Moncrieff and William Wilson led the break and stood up for what they believed to be lacking in the Church of Scotland.
- The Secession Church held key beliefs:
 - Presbyterian church government (that Knox started)

⁶ Mackenzie.

- The free offer of the gospel (as opposed to only offering the gospel to those who show signs of repentance)
- Christ as the sole head of the church (as opposed to the church being under the king or state government)
- Scripture's authority (over that of man's traditions)
- A congregation can call its own pastor (as opposed to the state or local government appointing one)
- Brown would stay with the Secession Church for all his life, becoming a key and vocal leader.
- Since there was a new movement, they needed a new seminary to train men. The group appointed Ebenezer Erskine, but by his own admission, being 67 years old, he would give way to a replacement.
- The first student to present himself for studies was John Brown. The problem was he did not have a University degree (needed for entrance into seminary). But his self-study proved to be more than sufficient. One of the movement's founders, knowing Brown said, "I think the lad has a sweet savor of Christ about him." (Ralph Eriskine)

Ministry at Haddington

- In July 1751 (29 years old) Brown was ordained as the pastor of the church in Haddington.
- He would minister there for over 35 years, making a lasting impact in Scotland and around the world.
- Brown would often speak of his disapproval of ministers who frequently switched pastorates.
- He would pray for his church and agonize over his own sin that was a trial for his church.
- ***Brown's main focus at Haddington was that of a pastor theologian.*** He was known for his humility, his love for the church, his keen theological mind and his amazing writing ability. His sermon preparation was uncommon in his day and desire for personal holiness was known throughout Scotland.
- "After 40 years he wrote: 'I know not whether to be more amazed at His kindness, or my rebellious treachery and ingratitude. God has been doing all He can to save... and I have been acting to my uttermost in opposing and dishonouring Him.'"

Impact on the future of the worldwide church

- What was the far-off future impact of Brown's 48-mile round trip walk into town to get his Greek New Testament and teach himself to read it?
- "To see the far-flung consequences of that walk to St. Andrews we must pass on nearly seventy years to 6 February, 1806. On that day in the Secession Church at Biggar, with snow sweeping over the silent moorland and surrounding hills, another John Brown stands to be ordained into the ministry of the Christian Church. He was too young to remember his grandfather, being only three years old when John Brown of Abernethy had died in 1787, but the spirit and influence of that great man lived on in the grandson. For the

shepherd boy of Abernethy had risen to become one of the greatest preachers and divines in Scotland and his thirty-six years ministry at Haddington had made the name of that East Lothian town known all over the English speaking world. (See the fascinating biography, *John Brown of Haddington*, by Robert Mackenzie, 1918. He will perhaps best be known for his *Self-Interpreting Bible*, which was so popular that twenty-six editions of it are to be found in the British Museum).”⁷

- He also wrote the self-interpreting Bible (a study Bible) that was for both those training in ministry and for those who wanted to know more about Christ.
- He was appointed the Professor of Divinity for the Secession Church, training men for ministry for the final 20 years of his life. He taught about 30 students a year in languages, theology, church history and preaching.
- Brown was known to teach the necessity of heart-religion and taught his students as their father would.
- Brown’s last words were “My Christ”...he died on June 19th, 1787 at 65 years old.
- Brown had many children: his sons, John (1754-1832) was minister of Whitburn for 55 years and was a prolific devotional writer; Ebenezer (d.1836) was a prominent preacher for 56 years; Samuel (1779-1839) helped start circulating libraries; and William (1783-1863) was a historian of missions. Grand son John Brown (1784-1858) served as pastor in Edinburgh, and was Professor of Exegetical Theology in the United Secession and United Presbyterian College. Great-grandson Robert Johnston (d. 1918) was a professor in the United Presbyterian College, Edinburgh, and United Free Church College, Aberdeen. Another great-grandson, John (Rab) Brown (1810-82), became a medical doctor and writer. And great-great-grandsons John (1818-92) and David Cairns (1862-1946) became outstanding Presbyterian teachers and writers. Brown's descendants so respected him that some traveled to Scotland from the United States in 1987 for events marking the bicentennial of Brown's death.
- In the book *Counsel to Gospel Ministers*, there is a collection of letters that John Brown wrote to those who were aspiring to pastoral ministry and those who were his students.
- These are some of the most heartfelt words a pastor can say to shepherd other pastors.
- His ministry was marked by a love for Christ, a love for Christ’s people, and a love for Christ’s church.

⁷ https://banneroftruth.org/us/about/banner-authors/john-brown/?srsId=AfmBOoreMcuG0r76JMECKuPpkuAM92g_F6dTG-xTvlgSZgg_NEUUFZAn