

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee

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Going to the Source

John 4:14b

In the course of preparing the Lenten study I am leading on John Knox and the Scottish Covenanters I have discovered something about the Scottish Reformation that I never noticed before. The reform of the Scottish church was part of a more broadly based social revolution in Scotland. Consequently we often give John Knox far too much credit for leading the Scottish Reformation. In fact when Knox returned to Scotland after eight years in exile he was astounded by the growth of the church reform movement during his absence. Something was happening that was beyond the ability of any leader to control. The revolution was born in the growing consciousness of the people that they could influence the future of Scotland. It is the same dynamic that we see unfolding in the Middle East today where people are discovering the extraordinary power they have to change their societies from the bottom up.

When John Knox landed in Scotland in 1559 this bottom up revolution was already far advanced. There had been a series of confrontations between Protestant leaders and the head of the Scottish government, the regent Mary of Guise, mother of Mary Queen of Scots. The regent was alarmed because the reformers had the support of the people in the streets who were becoming increasingly assertive.

When Knox was thrown into this mix an interesting pattern developed. Knox would go to a town and begin holding services in the largest church. Thousands of common people would pour in to hear Knox preach and then stay there to protect him from those who wanted to do him harm. Then the Protestant nobles would arrive with their military retainers. Then the regent Mary of Guise would decide this was a rebellion that needed to be put down. She would form an army to go break up the festivities. When she arrives with her army she notices that she is outnumbered and the people cannot be frightened into submission. Then negotiations follow. The people are granted freedom of worship and the armies withdraw and no blood is shed. Then Knox moves on to another town and the same thing happens all over again. It was the people who were driving the process of change.

In the fourth chapter of the gospel of John we find another story of change from the bottom up. Here Jesus has an encounter with a woman from Samaria. They meet at the well where the woman goes to draw her daily water supply. Everything about Jesus surprises this woman. She is surprised that a Jew would initiate a conversation with a Samaritan. She is surprised when Jesus offers her water when he obviously has no way to retrieve water from the well. She is profoundly surprised when he demonstrates detailed knowledge of her personal life.

The woman is also threatened because Jesus has so quickly probed to the one fact of her life that makes her most vulnerable. Her marital relationships have been one long string of disasters. She has been many times divorced. In that society this probably means that every husband has rejected her and set her aside leaving her with no means of support. And now she is no longer considered a candidate for marriage. Her future looks very bleak indeed. In the course of her conversation with

Jesus the woman comes face to face with her spiritual need as she never has before. She sees clearly the emptiness of her life. In the presence of this man who sees the truth about her that no one else perceives, she finds herself calling out for help. She asks for the living water that Jesus has come to bring.

What Jesus offers to the woman at the well is the love and acceptance of God. He is the source of God's grace which can transform her life from the inside out. Jesus says to her, "The water that I give will become ... a spring of water gushing up to eternal life (John 4:14b)." The woman's experience of going to the source suddenly redefines her life. No longer is she relegated to her long established role as a victim. Now she is empowered to take control of her life.

The extent of her transformation is demonstrated by what she does next. She immediately seeks out her fellow victims to let them know what she has discovered. The grace of God, which has transformed her broken spirit is there for them, too. The woman at the well organizes her neighborhood to be a place for healing. The revolution has begun. Change is moving from the bottom up.

This is the kind of community organizing that Moses was doing in Exodus 17. The people he led out of Egypt were determined to leave their victimhood behind. Their journey to a new life presents many challenges. One of the toughest challenges comes when they arrive at a place called Rephedim. Everyone knows they are in trouble because there is no water. They have come too far to turn back and are too exhausted to press ahead in search of water. Worst of all the people begin to complain. They complain about the deficiencies of Moses' leadership and they complain that God has not provided for their needs.

When Moses strikes the rock and the water gushes out he is teaching the people that it is not enough to leave the oppression of Egypt behind. This revolution calls them to a new understanding of their spiritual identity. This is a journey which puts them in touch with the grace of God which will heal their broken spirits. They are being led to the water which is their spiritual source.

The revolution which changed Scotland in the 16th century is often criticized for the destruction that was directed to the interiors of Scottish church buildings. The Reformation leaders were clearly of two minds on the subject. They wanted to redecorate but they were embarrassed by the wholesale destruction carried out by the large crowds that no one was able to control.

But the critics often overlook what the purging of these buildings reveals about the spiritual motivation for this bottom up revolution. One of the main targets of the people was the rood screens which existed to keep common people away from the alters when the Eucharist was celebrated. The rood screens were potent symbols of the victimhood the people were determined to put behind them. The tearing down of these screens was a powerful statement by the people that the church belonged to them. The grace of God which is revealed in this sacrament had been given to them. They need no longer be victimized by Kings or clergy who claim to hold the keys to God's grace and mercy. They had come to believe that God had invited them to the table. They were convinced that they could go to the source.

This was a revolution of the Spirit. "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life (John 4:14b)."