

IN THE BEGINNING: GEORGE WISHART

by Tom Cox

Presbyterian roots run deep in Scotland. While the reformed theology comes largely from John Calvin, it was John Knox who was the primary leader in spreading Calvin's ideas in Scotland, a spread which led not only to the Church of Scotland, but to Presbyterian churches elsewhere as well. But without George Wishart, there would have been no Reformation crusade by John Knox. Wishart's story is worth remembering, especially here in the First Presbyterian Church of Pocatello, which owes its existence to the evangelical work of the Rev. Samuel Wishard — a Scot from the same family lineage in spite of the variant spelling of his name.

George Wishart was master of a grammar school in Montrose and became attracted to the ideas of religious reform that were circulating in the early sixteenth century, ideas that came from John Wycliffe (1328-1384) as well as from Martin Luther and John Calvin. Charged with heresy, Wishart fled Scotland in 1538, but returned clandestinely about 1544 to travel about at his peril preaching Christianity as he conceived it.

At the time, John Knox, a graduate of St. Andrews University where he probably first encountered Reform ideas, was a young Catholic priest employed as an ecclesiastical notary and private tutor. Hired to teach Wishart's children and serve as his bodyguard, Knox was drawn to Wishart's religious ideas and, although still a Catholic priest, was soon an avid follower.

In 1545, Cardinal David Beaton, primate of the church in Scotland, ordered Wishart's arrest on charges of heresy. Warned that Beaton's minions were en route to arrest him, Wishart refused to run or hide. As his bodyguard, Knox prepared to stand by him, sword in hand, and fight off the arresting officers. Wishart would not hear of it. "One martyr is enough for today," he told Knox, and ordered him to flee. Reluctantly, Knox did as his mentor demanded.

For his part, Wishart was tried, convicted and burned at the stake at St. Andrews in 1546, thus becoming one of the first Protestant martyrs. Thankfully, he had prevented Knox from being another, for over the years that followed Knox became the embodiment of the Reformation in Scotland, changing that nation forever — and, as they say, the rest is history.