

# The Presbyterians

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Australian Catholic Truth Society No.1180 (1954)

THERE can be no doubt that the state of the world is forcing all who profess belief in the Christian religion to take stock of their position. As a consequence, old controversies between divided Churches are rapidly losing their appeal. Heated attacks on isolated doctrines, and equally heated defence of such doctrines, are giving way to a much more calm and impartial study of movements as a whole. It is becoming more and more realized that one of the best aids to right thinking is to know the full story of any given movement, all the stages of its growth rather than some particular phase of it in some individual period. A comprehensive view is often more helpful towards forming a sound estimate of a religion than a less extensive even though more profound knowledge of this or that particular feature of it.

This little book, therefore, is an effort to give within necessary limitations as comprehensive a survey as possible of the Presbyterian Churches, as those Churches have been called in Anglo-Saxon countries which followed the lead given by the Protestant reformer, John Calvin.

His own new Church Calvin himself called simply, "The Reformed Church"; and as it spread on the European Continent, it took the name of each country in which it was established. Thus arose "The Reformed Church of Holland," or "of France," or "of Germany." But all these churches are based more or less on Presbyterian principles.

In itself, the word "Presbyterian" says little of doctrine or worship. It refers chiefly to the form of Church-government adopted, which is vested in "presbyters," i.e., in "Seniors" or "Elders," as distinct from episcopal and congregationalist types of Protestantism. But Presbyterianism has its own special doctrines and forms of worship, to understand which sends us back to its historical origins.

## JOHN CALVIN

The Presbyterian Churches are ultimately traced back to John Calvin, who was born, some 25 years after Martin Luther, on July 10, 1509, at Noyon, in France. His Catholic parents intended him for the priesthood, and he commenced his preparatory studies with that end in view. But his brilliance in study led his father to persuade him to become a lawyer instead; a change John gladly made, as he had never been ardently religious. It is interesting to recall that he was a student at the University of Paris at the same time as St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, who were later to devote themselves as fervently to the preservation of the old religion as Calvinists to its destruction.

At the University, Calvin became unsettled religiously, probably influenced by the growing unrest in Europe set on foot by Martin Luther. He took up the study of the Bible, which led, in 1532, to what he called his "sudden conversion." Over-influenced by the Old Testament, he was overwhelmed by the thought of God's Majesty, and by a dread of his own sinfulness. Feeling that his Catholic religion could do nothing about this, he endeavoured to work things out for himself. But his system of theology was not really based on the Bible. As Dr. Clifford, the Baptist, rightly

says, "Calvin built his theological system first, and interpreted the Bible afterwards." More and more, in studying Calvin's writings, one feels that he was guided by his own subjective impressions, to which the Bible had to be adjusted.

The public expression of his new views resulted in Calvin's expulsion from Paris, and he was practically a fugitive, here, there, and everywhere, until 1536, when he settled in Geneva, Switzerland. During this interim period he first celebrated the Lord's Supper in the Evangelical Church at Poitiers, in the year 1534. Though he had never been ordained priest or minister, he justified himself by his doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers," and by his persuasion that he was called by God to minister to souls.

Then, when he was only 27 years of age, he wrote his "Institutes of the Christian Religion," the first and most systematic theology of Protestantism. He divided the work into six chapters: (1) The Ten Words (or Commandments); (2) Faith (The Apostles' Creed); (3) Prayer; (4) The Sacraments; (5) Christian Liberty; (6) State and Church.

Calvin took as his starting point Luther's teachings that the Bible is the only source of doctrine, and that men are justified by faith only. But, with his precision and systematic logic, he went to what lay behind the latter principle, God's terrible and arbitrary selection of some souls only for salvation, predestining all others to hell. He was not blind to the repellent nature of such teaching, but said simply that it must be right because God wills it. For Calvin's whole system centred on the doctrine of the absolute Sovereignty of God, and the total depravity of man. By the fall of Adam, according to Calvin, the whole human race became utterly corrupt, and all were rightfully condemned to hell. However, God in Christ died for the redemption of the "elect" apart from any merit of theirs. Those not chosen to be of the "elect" have no hope of salvation. Meantime; the grace given to- the "elect" is absolutely irresistible, so that once chosen they can never fall away and be lost, whatever they may do.

This grace being given immediately by God, there could be no room, according to Calvin, for any priestly or ecclesiastical intermediaries. But one can see that denial of episcopacy and of any special priestly order was practically forced upon him. He himself was but a layman, and he felt obliged to declare any order higher than that of baptized believers to be unscriptural and an unauthorized development in the Church. He taught, therefore, the universal priesthood of all believers. Each congregation was to set apart those members as ministers whom it approved as called by God to such offices.

Calvin did not, however, follow Luther in the doctrine of an "invisible Church." He insisted that there is a "visible Church;" not Rome with its hierarchy, but the "Christian Community" known as the true Church by the preaching of the Pure Word of God, and the due administration of the two Sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

To this visible Church Calvin gave great importance. It was to be governed by a Committee of presbyters and laymen under "Superintendents," which system he declared to be that of the Apostolic age. His society must be one of those who believe and obey. It was to be quite independent of secular authority, and not subject to the ruling Prince as Luther held. In fact, it was to be above the State, over which it had authority in all moral matters, and which had to enforce decisions of the Church.

Thus Calvin produced what Luther had failed to do, an organized ecclesiastical system; and one akin if anything to the historic Catholic Church which he had repudiated as utterly corrupt. In effect,

indeed, he had created a new authoritarian hierarchy of presbyters which drew from the Anabaptists the retort that they did not owe to his new presbytery an obedience he himself refused to Rome!

With the repudiation of the Catholic priesthood, of course, went the doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and the Sacrifice of the Mass. And here Calvin was much more radical than Luther. Luther believed in the Real Presence, explaining it by "consubstantiation" instead of "transubstantiation;" i.e., by teaching that the very substance of Christ's body and blood was present in the sacred elements together with the substances of bread and wine after consecration. He thus avoided the Catholic teaching that the latter substances are "converted into" the substance of Christ's body and blood. Furthermore, Luther had kept an unexpurgated Mass. These doctrines of Luther were fiercely controverted by Calvin. He denied that Christ's body and blood were present in the Eucharist except in a "spiritual manner." The Mass itself Calvin swept away as idolatry. He declared the Lord's Supper to be a Communion service only. The consecrated bread and wine could at most cause in the soul of one who had received them in faith the benefits merited for us by Christ's body and blood on the Cross. A person who approached Communion without faith would receive bread and wine, and nothing else. There was nothing else there! But Luther would never yield on this matter. At a conference with the Swiss at Marburg, in 1529, he is said to have chalked "Hoc est Corpus Meum" (This is My Body) on the table, and to have refused to budge an inch from the literal meaning of the words.

At Geneva, Calvin found every facility for the establishing of his new religion. In 1532, William Farel, a Protestant preacher, had taken advantage of the revolt of the people against the Duke of Savoy, to establish Protestantism. In 1536 he invited Calvin to join him. Calvin did so, and turned Geneva into a Church-State, in which he declared the Word of God to be the absolute authority in doctrine and morals. His Church secured a grip of steel on rulers and ruled alike.

The State was obliged to support the Church, inflicting temporal punishment on all who disobeyed its rules. Church authority was exercised by a "Consistory" of six clergy and twelve laymen. "Godly Discipline" was enforced. The "Consistory" condemned, and the State punished, such offences as absence from Church, dancing, card-playing on Sunday, visiting taverns, keeping company with Catholics, eating fish on Friday [since Catholics ate no meat on that day in remembrance of Our Lord's Passion], criticizing Calvinist teachings, calling the Pope a good man instead of an antichrist, and much else. Small wonder that, for such puritanical severity, Calvin was banished from Geneva in 1538. But in 1541 he returned from Strassburg, whither he had fled, and ruled the city once more with an iron hand. His system could allow no toleration. In 1546 Michael Servetus, a Unitarian, wrote to Calvin asking for a safe-conduct to Geneva for a personal conference on the subject of the Trinity, the truth of which Servetus denied. "If he comes," said Calvin, "and my influence has any weight, he will not leave the city alive." Servetus came, and was burned at the stake on October 27, 1553, for teaching doctrines opposed to Calvin's "Institutes." John Calvin himself died in 1564.

Calvin was one of the greatest, most determined, and most consistent of men. And the integrity of his moral life is unquestionable. But he was intellectually proud, and fanatically convinced that what he felt to be right must be the will of God. Unfortunately, also, his poor health coloured a temperament already inclined to puritanical extremes; and the result was a gloomy theology which made life unbearable for the average man. Hard and unsympathetic, a complete stranger to tolerance and gentleness, he had no patience with anyone who disagreed with him, and showed pitiless hostility towards all who opposed him, wielding a complete spiritual and temporal power equal to

any he had ever condemned in the Papacy. Such was John Calvin, the spiritual father of Swiss, Dutch, French, and German Reformed Churches, and more remotely of Scottish Presbyterianism.

To their credit, however, it must be said that modern Presbyterians reject whole sections of Calvin's teachings on the total depravity of the human race, and on God's decrees on predestination and reprobation. As a theological system; in fact, Calvinism is dead; and if it survives as an ecclesiastical policy, it is in a much modified form. The mystery is that so many Presbyterians, differing from conclusions drawn with rigid logic by Calvin from his premises, do not go farther and admit that his premises themselves were wrong in the first place. But that may yet come to pass.

## JOHN KNOX

The second great figure in the establishing of Presbyterianism was John Knox. John Knox was born in 1505, and studied for the priesthood at Glasgow under the Rev. Dr. John Major. Dr. Major had come back to Scotland from studies in France, an ardent supporter of the Gallican theory which held that the Pope himself was subject to a General Council in the government of the Church. It is not difficult to see how this paved the way for Presbyterian ideas.

Knox was ordained a priest in 1530, and although in 1540 he had already begun to show disaffection towards the Catholic Church, he could still sign documents in 1543 as "minister of the Sacred Altar under the Archbishop of St. Andrews." By 1546, however, he had definitely adopted Protestantism under the influence of George Wishart, an ex-priest who had returned from travels in Germany to advocate the new doctrines.

Knox himself was soon arrested for preaching Wishart's theories, and after a period of captivity in France, went to England where he was well received by Cranmer, and made an Anglican Royal Chaplain to King Edward VI. In 1552 he was even offered the Bishopric of Rochester; but he refused the offer, using all his influence to make the Anglican settlement more Protestant and less hierarchical in its constitution. Repudiating priestly celibacy, he married a Calvinist named Margaret Bowes. But soon afterwards, Edward VI having died, the accession to the throne of Mary Tudor drove him again into exile. This time he took refuge in Geneva where he met Calvin and became thoroughly imbued with the Swiss Reformer's teachings. At about this time he wrote his famous book, "The Monstrous Regiment of Women," denouncing the evil of the feminine government, a book for which Elizabeth never forgave him, though later on for political reasons she helped him to establish his Church in Scotland.

For a short time John Knox had returned to Scotland in 1555 from Geneva. He preached Calvinism, denouncing the Mass as idolatry, and advocating a root and branch change in doctrine, discipline, and worship. Many of the Scottish Nobles sided with him, eager to seize Church lands. They had long looked with covetous eyes on ecclesiastical properties; and seeing what Henry VIII had done in England. were ready to support a movement which promised them similar spoils. Knox, however, was soon compelled to flee the country again, returning to Geneva. But, during his absence, the ambitious Nobles banded together, constituted themselves as "Lords of the Congregation," and established the first "Solemn Covenant" to abolish Catholicism.

In 1559 Knox returned from exile to lead an insurrection against the Scottish throne, an insurrection Elizabeth supported with English troops, though she loathed Calvinism and rebellion. Knox was successful, and in 1560 the government of the country was entrusted to a "Council of Lords" who promptly enacted that Calvinist Protestantism was to be the established religion of Scotland, according to a "Confession of Faith" drawn up by John Knox and several other ex-priests.

In that same year, however, 1560, Mary Stuart acceded to the Scottish throne with one anxiety, to restore the old religion. But the opposition was too strong for her. In 1567 she abdicated, and fled to Elizabeth in England for protection, and to her death as Elizabeth's most dreaded political rival. The Scottish Parliament at once confirmed the Act of 1560, making Calvinism the State Religion.

John Knox lived a further five years, having taken as his second wife in 1564 Margaret Stewart, a girl of but seventeen years of age, who was left to mourn his death in 1572.

Of John Knox it must be said that he contributed nothing original to theology. He simply handed on the Calvinism he had learned at Geneva. In fact, he was almost Calvin over again. During the last twenty years of his life he had suffered from gravel and dyspepsia, and he himself admitted that his nature "was for the most part oppressed with melancholy." From Calvin he had inherited rigid and autocratic ideas of Church-government, whilst continual study of the Old Testament provided him with a ferocity in public utterances and also in practice. He declared that every Protestant has the right to slaughter every Catholic as an idolater, urging the savage persecution of the "Amalekites" - all Prelates and Papists. He was sincere in his convictions, but as a fanatic is sincere; and no modern Presbyterian would for a moment approve of the dogmatism, self-will, and intolerance with which he imposed Calvinism on Scotland.

#### DEVELOPMENTS IN SCOTLAND

John Knox prepared the way for Presbyterianism as we know it today. He was not really the founder of it. Much that he taught and prescribed was soon abandoned, and alterations introduced which he certainly never foresaw.

Let us go back a little way over previous ground. Until 1560, the Church of Scotland was the historic Catholic Church which had been acknowledged by the whole of Western Christendom through hundreds of years. In that year, 1560, the Scottish Parliament abolished the jurisdiction of the Pope, prohibited the celebration of Mass, and adopted the Calvinistic "Confession of Faith" drawn up by John Knox and his first companions.

Knox died in 1572. He had overthrown Catholicism in favour of Calvinism. His successor, Andrew Melville, created Scottish Presbyterianism. Under his direction, the "Second Book of Discipline" was produced, setting out the full Presbyterian system of government by ministers and laity in an ascending series of Church Courts, graded from local Kirk Sessions, through Presbyteries and Synods to the General Assembly presided over by a Moderator chosen annually. In 1592, the Scottish Parliament declared this Presbyterian system to be the established Church of Scotland.

But stability was not reached at once. In 1612 the '92 Act was repealed and episcopacy was restored, three Presbyterian ministers being consecrated Bishops after the Anglican pattern in London. But in 1637, when King Charles I and Archbishop Laud tried to impose the Anglican Book of Common Prayer on Scotland, and to transform the whole Church system there into one practically Anglican, the Scots revolted, signed a "National Covenant" binding themselves to defend Presbyterianism even at the cost of their lives, and compelled Charles to agree to its restoration. Episcopacy was abolished, and fourteen Bishops were deposed.

In 1661, however, Charles II declared the Covenant treasonable, again repealed the Act of '92, and restored episcopacy. 1689 brought the final settlement, with the advent of William of Orange to the throne of England. William was a Calvinist, who sympathized with the Presbyterians of Scotland. He disestablished and disendowed the Episcopal Church there, and restored Presbyterianism as the

established religion, granting it all the pre-reformation possessions of the Catholic Church in Scotland.

Those who preferred to remain with the Episcopal Church in Scotland became one of the non-conforming sects, and they have lingered on as the Episcopal Church of Scotland, having today seven Anglican Bishops in communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury.

To this day, the very first act of the King of England on his accession is to take an Oath to maintain inviolably the Presbyterian Church in Scotland; with all its rights and privileges; and every year he appoints a Lord High Commissioner to represent him, as protector and president, at the Presbyterian General Assembly in Scotland.

#### POSITION IN ENGLAND

In England, also, Presbyterianism made a bold bid for success. Among the early English reformers there were strong Presbyterian tendencies. Cranmer, Latimer, and Hooper were thinking of it. But the Episcopal Anglican Church prevailed under Elizabeth, Presbyterian elements being driven into nonconformity.

In the reigns of James I and Charles I, the British Parliament, in opposition to those kings, and led by the Puritans, aimed at nothing less than the establishing of Presbyterianism as the State religion. In 1647 the Long Parliament even abolished "Prelacy," and would have declared the Presbyterian to be the national religion only for Cromwell, who regarded "presbyter as priest writ large," and gave his support to Congregationalists.

In 1660, however, with the Restoration of the Monarchy, the Anglican became the State-established Church once more; and the "Act of Uniformity," demanding episcopal ordination for the clergy, and assent to the Book of Common Prayer, forced both Presbyterians and Congregationalists to form their own non-conformist Churches, as they have existed in England ever since.

#### AMERICAN CHURCHES

Calvinism arrived in America as early as 1562 with French Huguenots, followed by settlers from Holland belonging to the Dutch Reformed Church. But amongst their descendants Calvinistic teachings have been greatly modified, many being abolished altogether. In fact, there has been a drift amongst American Calvinists from orthodox Christianity towards anti-trinitarian doctrines, so that many of them have become practically Unitarians.

Presbyterianism was brought, from 1617 onwards, by the English Puritans, and by later immigration from Scotland and North Ireland. The first organized Presbytery was constituted at Philadelphia in 1706, developing into a regularly established Synod in 1717. The "Westminster Confession," together with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Westminster Divines, was adopted as the doctrinal standard; and American Presbyterianism became the theological stronghold of orthodox Protestantism in the United States for almost two centuries.

But even Presbyterianism has not been able to resist disintegration from causes both within and without the Church. In 1861 Presbyterians were divided by the slavery issue, leading to the separation of the South from the North. Moreover, "Fundamentalism" has agitated Presbyterianism as other Protestant Churches, and Biblical literalism has been discarded by many, whilst there have been many charges in doctrine, worship, and discipline.

According to the "World Almanac of 1948," the following distinct varieties of Presbyterians exist today in the United States:

Associated Reformed Presbyterian Church (General Synod) 23,385  
Associated Presbyterian Church of North America 250  
Colored Cumberland Presbyterian Church 30,000  
Cumberland Presbyterian Church 75,427  
Presbyterian Church in the United States 596,037  
Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America (General Synod) 1,559  
Orthodox Presbyterian Church 7,084  
Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America (Old School) 6,617  
United Presbyterian Church of North America 198,815

The above list, however, is inadequate; but can be accepted as an indication of the extent to which Presbyterians are divided. According to the "Yearbook of American Churches" (1943) there are, all told, 2,800,000 members of Presbyterian Churches in the United States of America.

### PRESBYTERIAN TEACHINGS

It would not be possible, in so small a book as this, to give an exhaustive account of Presbyterian teachings. But some mention must be made of the attitude of Presbyterians to the Bible, the Church, the Ministry, the Creeds, and the Sacraments.

### THE BIBLE

Presbyterians have been outstanding in their acceptance of the Bible alone as the only authority on which true religion can be based, and for the most part they experience a profound distaste for any traditions prior to those dating from Calvin. But, although they still subscribe nominally to the "Bible-Only" theory, many modern Presbyterians are becoming hesitant.

They are beginning to realize that the Church existed before a line of the New Testament was written, and that the earliest Christians obtained their knowledge from the teachings of the Church, not from the reading of the Bible.

Their scholars have recognized also that the New Testament is not a systematic account of the Christian revelation, that its books omitted much that was generally known, and that they themselves would like to discover the additional matter from the study of early traditions.

Moreover, they are becoming more and more doubtful of the divine guidance of individual readers of Sacred Scripture. Certainly, if all sincere readers had drawn the same conclusions, the result would be very impressive. But experience shows the very opposite. The need of authentic interpretation by an authoritative Church in accordance with traditional teachings from the very beginning is becoming more and more evident to them.

Also the widespread driftage of so many Protestants from any belief in the Bible as divinely-inspired at all is a further reason for doubting the ability of a book, with no living voice to define its meaning, to provide any consistent and permanent basis of faith. Many who still believe in Christianity, therefore, are showing signs of retracing their steps in a Catholic direction as regards the Bible and the principles of its interpretations.

### THE CHURCH

When we turn to the question of the Church, it becomes very difficult to estimate the Presbyterian position.

The general tendency of the Protestant reformers, after repudiating the claims to divine institution and authority on the part of the Catholic Church, was to deny that Christ ever instituted a Church at all. For them, the Church was a voluntary association of like-minded persons making no claim to any Apostolic succession of any kind save in what they conceived to be the faith. Far from wanting continuity with the past, they wanted an entire break away from it.

John Calvin, however, had other ideas. For him, the Church was indeed a divine institution which had become corrupt, and which he was called upon to restore. The authority it exercised was divine, not merely human; and his was an absolutist religion, just as the Catholicism which he rejected. That John Knox inherited this idea is clear from his 1560 "Confession of Faith," where we read, "out of which Kirk there is neither life nor eternal felicity." The "Westminster Confession," of 1643, says a little more mildly, "out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation."

Original Presbyterian doctrines, therefore, held that membership of the Presbyterian Church is necessary for all who wish to save their souls. Even in quite recent times Drs. Wotherspoon and Kirkpatrick have written in their "Manual of Church Doctrine" that Presbyterianism maintains a ministry deriving its authority, not from the people, but from Christ; and that all the acts of the ministry "are proper to Christ only, as Apostle of God, Mediator of the New Covenant, and High Priest of the House of God."

It must be said, however, that most Presbyterians would regard that as exaggerated clericalism. More recently still, Prof. W. D. Niven, D.D., of Trinity College, Glasgow, has written of the Presbyterian system, "We no longer assert that it possesses exclusive scriptural sanction; we claim only that it is founded on and agreeable to the Word of God. We recognize that it does not suit all. We hold that, while no definite and complete polity is unambiguously enjoined in Scripture, the principles are in Scripture, and we are convinced that our polity does fuller justice to them than any other." In the same context he makes the remarkable statement, "Our system in essence was old and tested long before the Christian Church was founded, for it is the system of the Synagogue." ("Towards Reunion," pp. 119-120).

In the light of those last words one may well ask how the Presbyterian Church can possibly claim to be a Church such as Christ intended? For He, certainly, had no intention of re-establishing the Synagogue!

## THE MINISTRY

In its doctrine of the ministry Presbyterianism holds a unique place amongst the Protestant Churches.

Martin Luther, in rejecting the authority of the Church for the authority of the Bible, repudiated the priesthood as it had hitherto been accepted. He maintained the priesthood of all believers, to the exclusion of any sacerdotal caste receiving special powers above those of the ordinary faithful. He was content that authority over the Church, previously exercised by the hierarchy, should be vested in the secular Prince; and he regarded the work of ministers as merely pastoral, a function theirs by election and commission on the part of the members of the Church. "The ministry," writes Peake, "possess no priesthood which does not belong to the laity; and there is no function of the ministry which it is illegitimate for the layman to perform, provided he does it at the call of the Society." ("Toward Religion," p. 189).

Now John Calvin began by acting on that principle. He himself was but a layman; and, as we have seen, in 1534 he celebrated the Lord's Supper in the Evangelical Church at Poitiers. But, in 1536, when he published his "Institutes," he had convinced himself that there was a special ministerial office in the Church, that of "presbyters." He maintained that, in the New Testament, the term "presbyter" meant "elder," and the term "bishop" meant "overseer"; but that both terms referred to one and the same "Order" in the Church. That got rid of a special order of "episcopacy." But it admitted a special order of "presbyters." At the same time, Calvin allowed for the appointment of laymen as "elders"; the "presbyters" to preach and administer the Sacraments; the "elders" to assist the "presbyters" and help in the government of the Church.

There is a good deal of confusion amongst Presbyterians themselves as to the distinction between "elders" and "presbyters"; so much so that Presbyterians can be divided, like Anglicans, into a Low Church group, and a High Church group.

The Low Church Presbyterian holds that "elders" and "presbyters" constitute exactly the same order. Both "elders" and "presbyters" are ordained by imposition of hands, "presbyters" as "teaching elders" to be specially trained and to whom custom alone restricts the conducting of worship, preaching, and the administration of Sacraments; the others are ordained by imposition of hands as "ruling Elders." The only distinction between them is one of special reverence for the ministerial office. Neither "teaching elders" nor "ruling elders," however, are different in themselves from the unordained laity. They are merely members of the Church who have been authorized by others to act on their behalf. Thus Dr. Fairbairn writes, "Christ spoke no word, did no act, that implied the necessity of an official priesthood for His people. He enforced no sacerdotal observance, instituted no sacerdotal order, promulgated no sacerdotal law." ("Place of Christ in Modern Theology," p. 48), Dr. Fairbairn concludes that Christ founded a Society which "in its collective being has a priestly character, but is without an official priesthood."

High Church Presbyterians, on the other hand, whilst repudiating sacerdotalism, maintain the necessity of, and divine institution of, a specially trained class of presbyters, withdrawn from secular callings, to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments. They point out that if "ruling elders," already ordained as such by imposition of hands, are appointed "presbyters," they have to be ordained afresh, which would not be were no new powers necessary; and they claim to possess Apostolic Succession in the "original presbyteral form"; i.e., through a continuity of ordinations by the ordained, with prayer and laying on of hands.

Many, however, even of those inclined to High Church tendencies, think this is going too far: They deny that presbyters have any inherent powers to transmit to others by ordination. According to them, there can be no Apostolic Succession of Orders in that sense. Ordination must be by presbyters, not casually assembled, but associated constitutionally in a "presbytery." The corporate body of Presbyterians, represented by the presbyters, does the ordaining, and the only continuity is one of external authorization. The continuity is one of jurisdiction rather than of any special powers over and above those of the laity.

It is difficult to see how Presbyterians can claim more than is held in this last opinion. After all, the first Presbyterians in Scotland were all ex-priests who made nothing of Apostolic Succession of Orders. They repudiated their priesthood and any transmission of powers beyond those possessed by every baptized member of the Church. They entirely changed the historical form and intention of the ordination rite. And it is no more than custom which, as opposed to Congregationalism, insists

that the "call" of a minister has to be sustained by the "presbytery," which ordains and inducts him. In the end, this leads back to the universal priesthood of believers, with no more than a conventional distinction between clergy and laity.

## THE CREEDS

In stating what Presbyterians believe, Prof. W. D. Niven, D.D., of Glasgow, says, "Presbyterians hold the Catholic Faith expressed in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. They hold, too, the great principles of the Reformation, the universal priesthood of all believers, and the supremacy and sufficiency of the Word of God contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the rule of faith and life. In some form or other all hold and emphasize the doctrines of grace. A few Churches are Lutheran in theology; a few are Arminian [and thus opposed to Calvinistic predestination]; the great majority have as their subordinate standards a Confession of Faith which is distinctly Calvinistic. But the dogmatic Calvinism of past centuries is nearly everywhere dead. The rigour of confessional statements has in various ways, and in differing degrees, been expressly modified." ("Towards Reunion," p. 122).

Many problems are raised by such a statement. If Presbyterians accept the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, are those declarations accepted as a rule of faith in addition to the Bible? If so, what becomes of the Bible as a "sufficient rule of faith"? Or does Dr. Niven mean that Presbyterians do, but need not, accept the Creeds? Again, what is meant by the acceptance of the doctrines of grace "in some form or other"? Are these mutually exclusive forms? As for varieties of theology, the Lutheran, Arminian, and Calvinistic theologies are certainly irreconcilable. If all three flourish amongst Presbyterians, it cannot be said that there is one and the same faith for Presbyterians at all!

As a matter of fact, the only approximate guide to Presbyterian beliefs is to be found in the constantly modified "Confessional Statements." The Creeds are practically ignored by Presbyterians.

Now John Knox, with five other ex-priests, drew up the first "Confession of Faith" for Presbyterians in 1560, on strictly Calvinistic lines. But that "Confession" has long since been abandoned. Andrew Melville in his "Second Book of Discipline," so profoundly modified Presbyterianism that he, rather than John Knox, deserves to be regarded as its founder.

In 1566 Bullinger's "Second Helvetic Confession," professing to accept the Four Great Councils of the Catholic Church, those of Nicea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon, together with the three Creeds, the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian, became popular for a time; but it carries no weight with Presbyterians today.

The most influential "Confession of Faith" amongst Presbyterians has been that of Westminster, dating from 1643, and is the result of most peculiar circumstances which deserve a more detailed scrutiny.

In England, during the reign of Charles I, the British Parliament called together the "Westminster Assembly" of divines to advise it about the reconstruction of the Church of England. One hundred and twenty-one divines, including representatives from Scotland, assembled in 1643 under Presbyterian ascendancy. The Assembly drew up the "Westminster Confession," a most thorough and logical statement of the Calvinistic Creed. Thereupon, partisans of episcopacy abandoned the Assembly. With the Restoration of the Stuarts to the throne after the Commonwealth period, the assembly was declared null and void for England; but Presbyterians held to the "Westminster

Confession" as almost divinely-inspired, and based upon it the two most widely known Catechisms amongst Protestants, a "Longer Catechism" for ministers, and a "Shorter Catechism" for children.

But there has been a great driftage in recent years from these Westminster standards, and few Presbyterians would accept them as they stand. In fact, it would be very difficult to say that any particular beliefs are absolutely binding upon Presbyterians.

Prof. Niven says, rather optimistically, in "Towards Reunion," "Whilst it is primarily polity which makes a Church Presbyterian, we should not admit fellowship with any who, although organized like us, differed from us on the fundamentals of the Reformed Faith. The term Presbyterian does connote something as to doctrine. We have no sympathy with the demand for a 'creedless church;' which to us is a contradiction in terms."

But the fact remains that, within the fellowship of the Presbyterian Church, there are those who differ radically from doctrines at one time regarded as fundamental, and who deny the obligation of any set creed!

## THE SACRAMENTS

Presbyterians generally accept the two Sacraments according to the ordinary Protestant teaching, those of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

The "Shorter Catechism" defines a Sacrament as "a holy ordinance, instituted by Christ, wherein, by sensible signs, Christ and the benefits of the New Covenant are represented, sealed, and applied to believers."

Whilst the Sacraments are not to be regarded merely as symbols of spiritual benefits, neither can they be regarded as actually causing them. No more is obtained by receiving the Sacraments than by listening to the preaching of God's Word. But as devotional rites they stimulate faith and the realization of the graces they signify. Probably few Presbyterians today believe in baptismal regeneration, which they would tend to regard as an incredibly mechanical and even magical process!

Where the Eucharist is concerned, all ideas of its being a sacrifice offered to God by the Church, as in the Catholic Mass, are rejected. The Lord's Supper is a "Communion Rite" only, and its relation to the death of Christ on the Cross is that of a memorial service, doing no more than bring to our minds thoughts of that Sacrifice offered once and for all in the past.

Needless to say, the doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the consecrated elements is definitely repudiated. The words of consecration make no change in the bread and wine. The Catholic doctrine of "transubstantiation," declaring that the substance of the elements is converted into the substance of Christ's body and blood, and the Lutheran doctrine of "consubstantiation," declaring that the substance of Christ's body and blood become present in the Eucharist with the substance of bread and wine, are both rejected.

Presbyterians believe that, after consecration, the bread and wine remain in themselves exactly as they were before. But the benefits Christ obtained for mankind by means of His body and blood are conferred upon the worthy receiver, according to the degree of his faith. The rite, therefore, must always be associated with the preaching of the Word, the minister's exhortation re-awakening the faith of those who participate.

## ORGANIZATION

As must have already become clear, the most distinctive feature of the Presbyterian Church is its polity or organization.

The general aim is threefold; (1) to secure parity of all ministers, as opposed to episcopacy; (2) to secure organic unity of the Church, as opposed to Congregationalism; (3) to grant the laity a share in the government of the Church through representative "Elders."

To attain this end, a closely-knit series of "Church Courts" has been established. The lowest is the "Kirk Session," consisting of the minister and ruling elders of a local congregation. The ruling elders are ordained for life, and assist the minister in deciding upon the admission of new members, in controlling Church affairs, distributing Communion when the Lord's Supper is celebrated, and in parochial visitation.

Above the "Kirk Session" is the "Presbytery," consisting of ministers and chosen ruling elders of a given district. The "Presbytery" oversees the congregations, ordains ministers, and hears appeals from "Kirk Sessions."

Still higher is the "Synod," a Council of a specified number of "Presbyteries."

Highest of all is the "General Assembly" of ministers and elders from every "Presbytery." A "Moderator" is chosen annually as official head of the Presbyterian Church during his term of office. He is not, however, a "monarchical prelate" with any special jurisdiction, but is subject to the Assembly over which he presides. The "General Assembly" reviews the work of the Church, appoints professors of theology, hears appeals and settles controversies referred to it by lower courts.

Presbyterians are expected to believe that this organization, whilst humanly constructed, is endowed with divine authority. Any judgement of the "General Assembly" is to be accepted as final, and not subject to review by any other tribunal on earth. The Presbyterian is probably the most authoritarian of all the Protestant Churches; and if the theory were held in reality by its members, they would differ from Catholics, not so much on the principles of authority, but merely as to what should be the organs of that authority. But it would be too much to say that Presbyterians have any faith at all in their Church as a Church comparable to that which Catholics have in the historic Catholic Church of the centuries.

There is not one world-wide Presbyterian Church. National Churches are quite independent of one another. It is true that, in 1877, an "Alliance of Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System" was established, with meetings of representatives from all countries every four years. But in no sense is this a governing body binding Presbyterian Churches into organic unity. At best, the meetings of the "Alliance" are regarded as useful conferences.

## WORSHIP

In their worship, Presbyterian Churches are not bound to any fixed liturgical forms or prayers.

In 1562, John Knox had drawn up for the first Presbyterians a "Book of Common Order." This was modelled on Cranmer's "Book of Common Prayer" to a great extent, and became known as "Knox's Liturgy."

But when King Charles I and Archbishop Laud, in 1637, attempted to force the Anglican Prayer Book on Scotland, the violent reaction resulted in the rejection even of Knox's Liturgy in favour of

"Free Prayers." There was a determination to make a clean sweep of everything savouring of "Ritualism."

The ceremonies retained in the Book of Common Prayer were declared superstitious and strong objections were made to prayers "from a book" of any kind. The "Westminster Assembly" issued a "Directory of Public Worship," but it gave instructions only for the order of services, leaving the actual language of the prayers to the minister. And even the following of the "Directory" was left optional.

As a result, "in worship," writes Prof. Niven, "there is little uniformity. Continental Churches have each a prescribed liturgy. British Presbyterianism and its many daughters have no liturgy formally imposed. We have a number of service books sanctioned by our Assemblies, but not imposed for general use." Liturgical forms, therefore, are as alien to Anglo-Saxon Presbyterian worship as episcopacy to Presbyterian government. Many prominent Presbyterians, however, admit the unreasonable nature of the prejudice against such things as observance of Christian Festivals, music in worship, and the use of traditional prayers consecrated by centuries of devotion; and they are seeking to restore them.

Turning to actual rites, the normal service consists of the reading of Scripture, the singing of hymns, non-liturgical prayers, and preaching, the service ending with the blessing invoked on all present by the minister. Occasionally, though rarely, the Apostles' Creed may be recited.

The Communion Service is usually celebrated quarterly. Four times yearly is far removed from the daily celebration of the Eucharist in the early Church as recorded in Scripture. But, at the Reformation, the reaction against the Mass and the substitution of preaching as the central feature of divine worship, led to a depreciation of the Eucharist. And the loss of belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament made it seem of little importance. To this day, sick and dying Presbyterians are rarely, if ever, given the opportunity of receiving Communion.

In the actual celebration of the Lord's Supper there is, again, no rigid liturgy. A table is placed in the Church, at which the minister stands, facing the congregation. The elders of the Kirk Session sit on either side of him. Throughout, the congregation remains seated in the pews, along which linen cloths are placed. After hymns and prayers, and a brief sermon by the minister, and possibly the reading of the Creed, the minister recites the words of consecration, and either the minister or the elders distribute the bread and wine to the people in the pews, individual cups as a rule replacing the common cup, on hygienic grounds. The rite concludes with prayers, a hymn, and the ministerial blessing.

We have the assurance of the Rev. D. Cairns, M.A., that there has been "during the last generation a marked return to the earlier and better traditions of Presbyterianism in the matter of worship; and this has shown itself in sacramental worship. Interest in its form, and in the beauty and fitness of the language, has been reviving, and faults of slovenliness and carelessness are being corrected." ("The Holy Communion," p. 69). If this be so, the return is not really to earlier and better forms and traditions of Presbyterianism, but in the direction of the Catholic traditions too hastily renounced in the first place during the violent reactions of the Protestant reformation.

## MEMBERSHIP

Membership of the Presbyterian Church is restricted to those only who have been enrolled as communicants, together with their baptized children. But the latter are not regarded as full

members. They are admitted to that status usually from the age of 16 upwards, after a course of instruction, followed by confirmation given by the minister. Admission to Communion requires the approval of the Kirk Session, which acts on the minister's recommendation, and inscribes the name of the new graduate on the "Communicants' Roll," on which is recorded also each subsequent Communion Service attended.

People who regularly attend Presbyterian Churches, but who do not enroll as communicants, are not regarded as members of the Church, but are called "adherents."

World statistics [1954] give, in round numbers, about 10,000,000 "communicant members," and about 30,000,000 "adherents" who would at least describe themselves as "Presbyterians" of one kind or another.

## TENDENCIES

The tendency of Presbyterianism, unfortunately, has been towards doctrinal disintegration, and to a more and more indeterminate and vague kind of Christianity.

Writing of Protestantism in general, the Rev. T. M. Parker, M.A., says, "Liberalism, deriving from the modernist tendencies in Germany, combined with the influence of nineteenth-century physical science, has involved the larger Protestant bodies to a greater or less extent, and made them abandon their previous standards of orthodoxy. Protestantism nowadays is no longer a basically united, if outwardly divided, creed; it is rather a congeries of opinions uniform only in their rejection of Catholicism." ("Post-Reformation Developments," p. 19).

The Presbyterian Church has particularly suffered in this way. In the book "Protestantism - A symposium," p. 77, the Presbyterian G. Harkness writes, "The Presbyterian Church has been more sharply divided by the fundamentalist-modernist controversy than has any other in our time. The liberalism of the clergy far outruns that of the laity." Nor are the Presbyterian Churches capable of defending their own one-time standards. Heresy-hunts are out of fashion, since the only practical result is to glorify their victims both in and out of the Kirk. But they occur occasionally; and it is significant that when, in 1934, Dr. Samuel Angus, a Presbyterian professor of theology, was charged before the General Assembly in Sydney, Australia, with the teaching of modernism, and with the violation of the doctrinal standards of the Presbyterian Church, he was acquitted and confirmed in his position. On the other hand, two years later, in 1936, in America, Dr. J. Gresham Machen was expelled by the Presbyterian Assembly there for resisting modernism, and for his fidelity to the traditional doctrinal standards of the Presbyterian Church. Thereupon he founded the "Orthodox Presbyterian Church," making fidelity to the "Westminster Confession" the basis of membership.

Despite the authority of its imposing series of Church Courts, it is difficult to see how Presbyterianism can avoid drifting into unbelief in Christianity altogether.

## THE REAL PROBLEM

In complete sincerity and good faith, the vast majority of Presbyterians accept their religion as they have been taught it, concerned more with living up to its ideals as a way of life than with trying to find out for themselves on what grounds they accept it as true. Few of them make any study of its origin and development through the centuries.

But even an elementary review of its history, such as given here, raises many problems for the inquiring mind. It is so evident that many merely human factors, not only individual but national,

and not always of the noblest, have contributed towards the creation of Presbyterianism. Might it not be that sheer love of Christian Truth was sacrificed to those?

Then, too, much that was at first proclaimed as truth has had to be abandoned by the Presbyterians themselves. Doctrines which both Calvin and Knox held to be basic in their system are today no longer believed by their followers. Who today believes that all human beings are so totally depraved as a result of original sin that no one is capable of any good at all? Or that God elects a few favoured souls apart from any merits of theirs, predestining them to heaven. and destining all others to hell as reprobates, regardless of any behaviour on their part? Or that the Grace of God is so irresistible that the elect could not be unfaithful to it if they tried? Yet if Calvin and Knox fell into error on these matters, may they not have fallen into error on others still accepted on their authority?

But, leaving aside those teachings Presbyterians themselves no longer accept, let us take the great basic questions of the Church and the Ministry. They constitute the real problem for Presbyterians today.

Do Presbyterian theories on these matters, theories first put forward in the 16th century, find any support in Scripture, as was supposed? Were the views of Calvin and Knox, still accepted by so many, the truer views, brought about by a better understanding of the Bible, or were they views adopted to defend what had been done in breaking away from the historic Catholic Church?

#### THE ORIGINAL CHURCH

Take first the Church. Ever since the Apostolic age there has existed on earth a religious institution which has regarded itself as no human invention, but as a divine creation. It has proclaimed itself, in the words of St. Paul, as "the pillar and the ground of truth." (1 Tim., 3:15). Of that Church Our Lord had predicted that the "gates of hell" would never prevail against it (see Mt., 16:18); and He had promised to be with it "all days even till the end of the world." (See Mt., 28:20) Yet both Calvin and Knox left it, on the plea that the gates of hell had prevailed against it, and that Our Lord had failed to keep His promise!

Again, it is becoming popular with many Presbyterians to make much of their profession, "I believe in the Holy Catholic Church," when they recite the Apostles' Creed. But those words were said by Christians for over 1500 years before the Presbyterian Church came into existence; and all in Western Christendom intended the Catholic Church of their time, not the Presbyterian Church. Were all those millions for all those centuries wrong?

Furthermore, of all the different forms of Churches established by various Protestant Reformers, is there any reason for believing particularly in Presbyterianism? The extraordinary variety of Churches they established gives the impression of amazing guesswork on the part of the different Protestant Reformers when they were looking around for something as a substitute for the Catholic Church they had abandoned. Why should Presbyterianism be preferable to Anglicanism, or Lutheranism, or to the creed of Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists, or any of the hundreds of other lesser forms of Protestantism.

These questions are at least worthy of further thought. But equally great difficulties arise when we turn to the problems of the Ministry.

#### THE ORIGINAL MINISTRY

Abandoning episcopacy, and denying any priesthood distinct from that of "all believers," Calvin established a ministry of "presbyters." In doing so, he claimed that he was returning to primitive Christian teaching and practice. But was he?

In the New Testament, the doctrine of the ministry is part of the doctrine of the Church. If men created the Church, it would be for them to organize it and create its ministry. But the New Testament gives no signs of that. The ministry was created by Christ before the Church existed to provide it. Christ, not the members of the Church, called and empowered the Apostles.

"He called unto Him whom He would Himself . . . and He made that twelve should be with Him, and that He might send them to preach." (Mark, 3:13-14). " 'You have not chosen me,' He said to them, 'but I have chosen you, and have appointed you, that you should go, and should bring forth fruit.' " (Jn., 15:16). To them alone much of His teaching is committed. They had to teach others "all things whatsoever" He had commanded (see Mt. 28:20). They alone are commissioned to celebrate the Eucharist, and to forgive sins. (See Lk 22:19 and Jn 20:23)

The Apostles did not have their position bestowed upon them by the choice of their fellow-Christians. Their priesthood was directly from Christ. They taught and ruled with authority because He had empowered them to do so. And from the very first in the primitive Church the Apostles made disciples, and added them to the Church, all having to continue in "the doctrine of the Apostles." (Acts 2:42).

Presbyterians avoid the implications of all this by saying that the Apostles were extraordinary ministers, and that after their death the Church carried on with a system of presbyters, all of whom were equal in status. But the truth is that the primitive Church depended on a ministry derived from the Apostles themselves. So St. Paul ordained Timothy with laying on of hands and told him both to safeguard the "gift" imparted to him, and to ordain others also (see 1 Tim 4:14 & 5:22, and 2 Tim 1:6). Acts 14: 22-23, shows that St. Paul ordained priests in all his Churches. If Timothy and Titus were expressly commissioned to ordain (see, for example, Titus 1:5), it was because "presbyters" as such had no power to ordain.

There had to be in the Church, then, a transmission of priestly power and authority from the Apostles and through the Bishops. And the value of the ministry depends upon the fact that the link with the Apostles has never been broken. The hierarchy of the Church was no merely human contrivance. It belongs to the inner heart of the Gospel. Its power is "from above," not conferred "from below."

It has been said that the doctrine of Apostolic Succession and of the transmission of special spiritual powers was the invention of later ages. But that is not a fact. The episcopal constitution of the Church was from the beginning universal. Of the creation of ministers by the Church as a whole, or by particular groups of Christians, we find not a single example in primitive times. And it is impossible to believe that the priesthood given by Christ lasted only so long as the original recipients survived, and was then replaced by a ministry of an entirely different kind which the Church devised for itself!

How did the Church everywhere become possessed of Bishops and priests? There were many controversies in the early Church; but never over this! Who can suppose that St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, who was so close to St. John, could have struck out on a wholly new line with regard to the episcopate within seven years after the Apostle's death, and have succeeded in persuading others that it was not new at all?

Consider Presbyterian history itself. From its origin in the 16th century, every attempt to impose episcopacy upon Presbyterians has awakened violent protests. Had Presbyterianism been the original system, attempts to introduce episcopacy would have awakened similar protests. Yet there is not the slightest trace of such protests in the early Church. There is no mention or recollection of any but episcopal control.

Must we not say that, if the whole Church fell into a total misconception about the priesthood Our Lord intended His Church to possess, then there is no solid assurance of divine guidance by anybody? Is not the far greater likelihood that of a mistaken course initiated by Calvin, and modified and developed by Andrew Melville in the construction of the Presbyterian system?

## CONCLUSION

As we have seen in this booklet, Anglo-Saxon Presbyterianism began in Scotland. And one naturally asks how it came about that a new religion was partly imposed upon and partly welcomed by that country.

Presbyterians would doubtless say that success was due to the new religion being a return to the purer system and truer faith of primitive Christianity. But in reality the new religion was the creation of John Knox and Andrew Melville of a system unlike anything in Sacred Scripture, and unknown in the primitive Church; whilst Presbyterians themselves reject today many of the doctrines which the original versions of their religion proclaimed.

The truth is that many quite other causes contributed to the success of the new religion. And it is not pleasant for a Catholic to have to record them.

For it there was nothing wrong with the Catholic religion in itself, much was wrong with the Catholics of those times who professed that religion. Possessing the greatest of all God's gifts to men, they failed to live up to it. The Catholic Bishops of Scotland were worldly, and neglectful of their spiritual duties. The ordinary clergy had degenerated in learning and piety, earning the contempt of their own people. The people themselves were left without sufficient instruction in their religion. The lax Catholic nobility saw in the religious upheaval a chance to confiscate for themselves still further ecclesiastical property. It was a time, too, of much political confusion, under French and English influences, alternating regencies, and finally the weak rule of Mary, Queen of Scots. The people scarcely knew where they were when John Knox came, sincere and forceful, even though mistaken. He at least demanded the practice of some religion. The nobles, though not from noble motives, rallied to his support. And John Knox did not hesitate to wield the weapon of persecution, making it extremely uncomfortable to remain a Catholic.

It is not difficult to see why people, uninstructed in the faith, should have failed to perceive the doctrinal errors of the new religion; and why, with such bad example shown them by their clergy, and with such positive pressure put upon them, they should have agreed to accept a new religion of almost any kind.

As I have said, no Catholic can enjoy writing such things of his fellow Catholics of former ages. But the truth must be told from every point of view, if one is to get the really true point of view. For the rest, times have changed. The abuses of former ages, which the first Presbyterians made the occasion of their revolt, have long since been remedied by the Counter-Reformation within the Catholic Church herself. Surely Presbyterians are justified now in diverting their attention from abuses that have ceased, to a reconsideration of the religion they have inherited from excitable

reformers instead of the Catholicism that should have been theirs. Does the Presbyterian religion, on its own merits, deserve one's allegiance? Would it not be worth while to take up the study of the Catholic religion in itself, and quite apart from any thought of people who have professed it, but who have obviously failed to let it influence their lives?

Thousands, not only from the Presbyterian, but from the various other forms of Protestantism, have acted on these suggestions, reconsidering both their own position and that of the Catholic Church. And they have become Catholics. The writer of this booklet is one who himself took that step. And he blends his voice with all others who have done so, in declaring that the certainty and peace Christ intended us to possess are to be found in their fullness only in the Holy, Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman Church - the historic Christian Church of all the centuries.

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Imprimatur: + D. MANNIX, Archiepiscopus Melbournensis. Nihil obstat: WILLIAM M. COLLINS, Censor Dioc. 1954.