Presbyterian and Reformed Churches

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A Global History

James Edward McGoldrick

with
Richard Clark Reed
and
Thomas Hugh Spence Jr.

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Preface

In 1905 Richard Clark Reed (1851–1925), then professor of church history at Columbia Theological Seminary, produced his *History of the Presbyterian Churches of the World*. Westminster Press published the book, and it soon became a widely read survey of Presbyterian and Reformed growth around the globe.

Reed followed his father into the ministry of the Presbyterian Church in the United States after study at King College and Union Theological Seminary in Virginia. The future historian was pastor of congregations in Tennessee, Virginia, and North Carolina before he joined the faculty of Columbia Theological Seminary in 1898. In addition to his pastoral and professorial labors, Reed was associate editor of the *Presbyterian Quarterly* and the *Presbyterian Standard* and moderator of the General Assembly of his church in 1892. He wrote *The Gospel as Taught by Calvin*, *A Historical Sketch of the Presbyterian Church in the United States*, and *What Is the Kingdom of God?*, as well as his major history of Presbyterianism and numerous articles.

As his publications indicate, Reed was an active churchman. While a professor at the seminary in Columbia, South Carolina, he decried the higher critical approach to the Old Testament popular in some American institutions. Reed warned that the influence of critical hypotheses about the composition of the Bible would lead to a loss of confidence in its divine authority. As a contributor to the *Presbyterian Standard*, the professor vigorously defended the historic Reformed commitment to the supremacy of Scripture and opposed the contentions of Charles Darwin, which he found incompatible with the teaching of Christianity.

Reed demonstrated his conservative posture further by resisting the Federal Council of Churches because that body engaged in political activities that, in his judgment, violated necessary separation of church and state. Reed opposed forming a council of Reformed churches because he feared it would lead to a union of denominations that lacked doctrinal homogeneity. When the General Assembly of his own church decided to allow a woman to address that body in 1920, Reed cast the only vote against it.

In his *History of the Presbyterian Churches of the World*, Reed provided a substantial survey in a readable style as a textbook for colleges and seminaries. He treated no era or church body in detail, and his coverage of events ended at the opening of the twentieth century. Although individual Presbyterian and Reformed groups have produced their own denominational histories, and compendia of information have appeared in historical dictionaries, no work comparable in scope to Reed's history has appeared in print since publication of his work.

Thomas Hugh Spence Jr. (1899–1986), a Presbyterian minister and at one time director of the Presbyterian Historical Foundation in Montreat, North Carolina, composed a manuscript that covers most of the same ground as Reed but more thoroughly. Spence's work, however, remains unpublished, despite the wealth of information it contains. With the permission of Mrs. Maria Elizabeth Thomas, Spence's daughter, I have made extensive use of his material in this revision and expansion of the pioneer work of Reed, so I have included Thomas Hugh Spence Jr., along with Reed, as one of the authors of the book. Thanks to the kindness of Mrs. Thomas and the encouragement of my colleague Dr. Morton H. Smith, who brought the Spence manuscript to my attention, it became possible to proceed with this project to provide a lucid, up-to-date history for Presbyterian and Reformed believers of all nations.

When Reed chose the title for his book, he explained the term *Presbyterian* signified those churches that subscribe to that form of connectional polity, even though some of them refer to themselves as Reformed rather than Presbyterian. In this new version of the history, I have followed Reed's practice but have altered the title to be more evidently descriptive.

In general the description of events follows the same order the original author designed. At the end of each chapter I have added suggestions for further reading. In some cases it was necessary to add or delete material, but the book as revised remains, up to the twentieth century, in large part the accomplishment of Richard Clark Reed, a tribute to his enduring relevance as a church historian.

The scope of this book takes the history through the twentieth century. The few references to developments since then are incidental and intended only to provide logical and chronological connections. In historiographical terms, the period since the year 2000 is one of current events, the history of which remains to be written when scholars have the opportunity to assess their effects.

Although the objective of this study is to give due recognition to the numerous Presbyterian and Reformed bodies around the world, the constraints of time and space made it necessary to be less than all-inclusive. In some cases this was because the Reformed presence in some countries is so small as to be almost negligible in influence, while in other cases the number of denominations and subgroups is so large that it became necessary to be selective. In the matter of statistics, I have relied on three major sources, but, to my dismay, they often do not agree, and sometimes the discrepancies are astonishing. Readers who consult these resources will readily see the problem. In almost all accounts, the statistics are therefore, at best, estimates.

Special thanks are due to the many authors from whose works I have gleaned useful information and to Linda Rudolph, who typed the manuscript and encouraged me as I progressed with this project. For her patience, diligence, and cheerful disposition I shall always be grateful. Thanks are due to Annette Gysen, who edited the manuscript and made helpful suggestions for improving it.

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Introduction to Presbyterian History

Presbyterian history may be said to have originated in the New Testament, when the apostles of Christ organized a form of church government that placed authority over the congregations in the hands of elders. This was not an innovation but a continuation of the pattern that had prevailed in Jewish synagogues for many years. In the New Testament the terms *pastor*, *elder*, and *bishop* are used interchangeably, as, for example, when Peter admonished church leaders: "The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ.… Shepherd [pastor] the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers [bishops] (1 Peter 5:1–2 NKJV).

Presbyters, or elders, were bishops in apostolic times, and there was a plurality of them in each congregation. Some elders concentrated on teaching the Word of God while others exercised governing oversight, but all were equal in authority and ruled together. Presbyterianism is, then, a form of church polity found in the New Testament. Any church body that implements this pattern may be called Presbyterian regardless of its doctrinal principles, although most churches that fit this description have espoused to some degree the position known as Calvinism or Reformed theology.

The Church of the Second Century

According to the church father Ignatius of Antioch (d. ca. 111), a gradation of authority among elders began to appear early in the second century. It then became common to regard only one elder in each congregation as the bishop and to acknowledge his precedence over the others. Gradually the distinction became pronounced, and by the end of the second century, bishops had gained superiority over elders. In this way the church moved from its original Presbyterian polity toward episcopacy (rule by bishops, from the Greek term *episcopos*, which means overseer).

The movement toward episcopacy was not uniform throughout the church, since it progressed more rapidly in some areas than in others. Traces of the older form of government lingered in some regions into the fifth century. Episcopacy was at first parochial, not diocesan. Each congregation, such as that at Smyrna or Philadelphia, had its own bishop, elders, and deacons. Although information about ecclesiastical developments in this early era is scant, it appears that elders and deacons then functioned much as they do in modern Presbyterian churches, and bishops operated in ways comparable to pastors today.

The Movement toward the Papacy

The evolution in church government can be traced with approximate accuracy only in outlines, but there is reason to believe it began when one elder in each congregation acquired the position of permanent moderator in the session of presbyters. The one who held that office would, as a matter of course, be noted because of his gifts for leadership and force of character, which would make him chief spokesman for his church in his relations with other congregations. As heresies and other disorders affected the Christian community, his position grew in influence and authority.

It is a well-attested fact that nothing contributed so much to the rise of authoritative bishops as the demand for speedy, stringent discipline to suppress developing disorders. As the church father and famous Bible scholar Jerome (340–420) explained, “Before factions were introduced…by the devil, churches were governed by a council of presbyters; but as soon as each man began to consider those whom he had baptized as belonging to himself and not to Christ, it was decided throughout the world that one elected from among the elders should be placed over the rest, so that the care of the church should devolve on him, and the seeds of schism be removed.”

The motive that prompted departure from scriptural simplicity was the belief that, for the preservation of sound doctrine and good order, it was necessary to concentrate authority in a few hands, that discipline might be more effectively administered. This motive continued, along with less worthy ones, until parochial episcopacy changed into diocesan rule, and that into the papacy. Municipal bishops gained ascendancy over rural ones and patriarchal bishops over them. Eventually the patriarch of Rome gained preeminence over all.

The Extinction of Presbyterianism

The exaltation of bishops, of course, diminished the influence of elders. As the latter ceased to be bishops in name, they ceased to be overseers in practice and were reduced to the role of servants to the bishops, who deputed them to preach and administer the sacraments. This development occurred concurrent with belief in the sacerdotal character of the ministry, and in keeping with this, it became a custom to regard pastors as priests. In this connection, the sacramental role of priests took precedence over the ministry of preaching. Eventually clergymen came to regard their function as hearing confessions, prescribing penances, and celebrating masses. Not only did the office of ruling elder fade away, that of teaching elder also declined in influence. So-called priests usurped the functions of the one Mediator (1 Timothy 2:5–6) and claimed almost exclusive control over the means of grace. When almost all traces of biblical eldership disappeared, little of apostolic Presbyterianism remained.

Church Polity and the Protestant Reformers

By the time Protestantism made its debut in the sixteenth century, the medieval church had developed an extensive hierarchy over which the pope presided in a regal manner. Late medieval efforts to restrict the pontiff's prerogatives through occasional general councils had been only slightly successful, so the ecclesiastical monarchy appeared to be firmly entrenched. When the work of reformation began with the labors of Martin Luther (1483–1546), he and his coworkers did not at first give great attention to church policy, for their initial concern was to correct false teaching about sin and salvation. Protestants extolled the authority of the Bible, but it did not yet occur to them that Scripture had a message for them about the visible form of Christ's kingdom of grace. They therefore left church government to develop under the influence of the circumstances in which they lived.

The State of the Church in England

When Protestant influences appeared in England early in the sixteenth century, the monarchy resisted changes in doctrine or polity, as Henry VIII (r. 1509–1547) defended traditional Catholic teachings. Even after the king broke with Rome and assumed rule over his church, he opposed the Protestants and maintained the episcopate, which then became subservient to the Crown rather than the pope. The government of the church remained hierarchical, with the king as supreme head and the archbishops and bishops as royal servants who held their positions at the king's pleasure.

The death of Henry VIII allowed Protestants to assert themselves vigorously because Edward VI (r. 1547–1553), the new monarch, embraced the Reformation. He and his religious advisors, however, remained committed to an episcopal system to administer the church. At that point the Church of England set for itself a difficult task. Having renounced the papacy in favor of Scripture as the supreme authority, Anglican scholars tried to show that the government of the church was derived from the Word of God. Thereafter, for many years learned Anglicans published academic treatises to verify their ecclesiastical structure, while sometimes godless rulers controlled the state church and used it to sanctify their policies. Like popes of the Middle Ages, monarchs of England claimed preeminence in church and state. Any reform in church government would have entailed major political consequences, and many strong Protestants feared the loss of royal patronage would damage their cause. They therefore endorsed a form of polity for which no higher warrant could be found than political expediency.

Luther and Germany

The challenge to Roman Catholicism that brought the Reformation to England originated in Germany, when Martin Luther decried the financial abuses connected with the sale of indulgences. It proceeded from that point to subject the entire structure of the medieval church to scrutiny under the searchlight of Scripture. In his 1520 *Address to the Christian Nobility*, Luther denied the sacerdotal character of the clergy when he asserted there is but one spiritual estate of which all genuine Christians are members, whether they are pastors or laymen. He proclaimed the universal priesthood of believers and insisted ordained ministers are but servants of their people. In addition, Luther contended God's people have the right to choose their pastors and to participate with them in matters of church discipline.

Luther's position was a radical contrast with centuries of tradition, and even some of his most zealous supporters recoiled from implementing the changes in polity it would have required. The Reformer himself allowed the circumstances of the time to deter him from pursuing drastic alterations in polity, since he judged the German people too ignorant to discharge the duties of self-government in the church.

Between 1524 and 1525, Germany was engulfed in a Peasants' War that brought massive loss of life and property before civil authorities suppressed it. Some of the rebels cited Luther's teaching about universal priesthood as inspiration for the uprising, but the Reformer denounced the insurgents and called the princes to crush them, which they were already resolved to do, with or without Luther's approval. One consequence of this tragedy was that Luther lost all confidence in common people and turned even more than before to the rulers of the German churches, in which evangelical princes exerted decisive authority. A 1555 formal agreement among the rulers affirmed their right to determine the religion of their territories, Catholic or Lutheran. What Luther expected to be benevolent leadership, however, eventually became authoritarian control over religion, but Luther was dead by then.

The early German Reformers were occupied primarily with proclaiming salvation by grace alone, and they did not attach great importance to any particular form of church government. They would have accepted the traditional episcopate, had the bishops embraced the evangelical faith. In their Augsburg Confession of Faith (1530), Lutheran leaders affirmed: "Our meaning is not to have rule taken from the bishops; but this one thing only is required at their hands, that they would permit the Gospel to be purely taught, and that they would relax a few observances which cannot be held without sin."

When Sweden adopted the Lutheran faith as an act of state, it left the episcopate in place, while in Denmark the king appointed superintendents who performed episcopal functions. Most German states put the management of church affairs in the hands of consistories, courts composed of clergymen and civil jurists subject to the princes. Undergirding the Lutheran approach to ecclesiastical polity was the belief that Scripture does not mandate a specific pattern, so Christians have the option to adopt whichever one is suitable to the needs of their particular situation. Lutheran churches today continue to operate with a variety of forms.

A Presbyterian Experiment in Hesse

Consonant with the elastic ecclesiology of the Lutheran Reformers, there was an effort in the German state of Hesse to adopt a generally Presbyterian polity. There Prince Philip (1504–1567), a champion of the Reformation, under the influence of Francis Lambert (1487–1530), his chief religious advisor, sought to strengthen the Protestant cause by all available means. Guided by Lambert, a converted Franciscan friar, a synod met at Homburg in 1525 to draft a charter for the government of the church in the principality of Hesse. That document called for congregations to elect their own pastors and to exercise discipline over their members. There was to be a synod of pastors and delegates from each local church to meet yearly to consider issues submitted by the congregations. This proposal, at least in purpose, approximated the New Testament model that became the pattern of later Presbyterianism, and it agreed with Luther's early teaching, but the great Reformer opposed the scheme as impracticable in the circumstances of the time. The plan did not take effect.

Zwingli and German Switzerland

Concurrent with the work of Luther in Germany, Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531) led the Reformation in Zurich. Although the two Reformers had much in common, they disagreed about some doctrines and labored independently of each other. Zwingli, even more than Luther, resolved to apply biblical patterns to all of life, but unlike the Wittenberg Reformer, he regarded the Old Testament as an authoritative model for church-state relations. He therefore had no conception of the church as an entity distinct from civil authority with its own structure of government. He favored an ecclesiocracy, in which church and state were one and the laws of the land regulated religious life. For example, Zwingli awarded the power of excommunication from the church to the civil magistrates. The council that governed the state selected pastors for the congregations.

Although some Reformers in German Switzerland advised giving the members some role in church polity, the magistrates retained their authority, and other Protestant cantons in general observed the same practice. While it is customary among historians to cite Zwingli's work as initiating the Reformed branch of the Protestant faith, his union of church and state was far removed from the Presbyterian pattern that became standard in Reformed churches around the world.

Early Presbyterianism

It is evident the first generation of Protestant Reformers concentrated on maintaining purity in doctrine and restoring biblical patterns in worship. They did not pursue the restoration of New Testament polity with the same fervor. This was, in the case of the Lutherans, a matter of exercising options, and for Zurich a simple adherence to Old Testament precedents.

Some Reformers were willing to accept almost any plan, while others left the matter to be decided by the exigencies of the future. To them church government was among the *adiaphora*, things indifferent because they were unrelated to the ministry of Word and sacraments. Credit for restoring church polity to the level it merits belongs to Martin Bucer (1491–1551) of Strasbourg and to John Calvin (1509–1564) of Geneva. Bucer, once a Dominican friar, was converted to the evangelical faith through the witness of Luther when the Wittenberg professor presented an outline of his theology at Heidelberg in 1518. Bucer arrived in Strasbourg in 1523, and soon the city council adopted the Reformation, as Protestant preachers worked to implement changes mandated by their allegiance to the gospel. Strasbourg was a comparatively tolerant community to which refugees from persecution in Catholic lands fled for safety.

Bucer had considerable influence as an evangelical theologian and churchman who strove relentlessly to promote unity within Protestant ranks. He failed to bring Luther and Zwingli together after their dispute about the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but he was able to unite the Protestants of South Germany into fellowship with the Lutherans. In church government Bucer introduced the office of *wardens*, officials selected from prominent Strasbourg families with the approval of the city council. He found the basis for wardens in the office of elders in the New Testament. Bucer distinguished between teaching and ruling elders, as most modern Presbyterians do. In developing his pattern for church order in Strasbourg, Bucer set an example that was to influence Calvin and the church in Geneva and, indirectly, Reformed churches around the world. Bucer and Calvin met in 1539 and became close friends.

Bucer's influence upon Calvin was substantial, both in doctrine and practice. The future Reformer of Geneva spent three years in Strasbourg, where he became acquainted with Bucer's teaching about offices of ministry, church order, discipline, and education. While residing there Calvin was pastor of a congregation in which Lutheran influence was prominent, but he did not accept German indifference toward forms of church government. On the contrary, Calvin came to believe early it is of paramount importance to distinguish clearly between church and society at large and that the church, not civil authorities, must administer discipline over its members. In his view the power of the Reformed faith could not be effective in vigorous evangelism without a clearly defined independent ecclesiastical organization. The kingdom of Christ, while not of this world, is nevertheless in this world and is here for the purpose of conquest. It must therefore have visible shape, and in order to have this, its limits and powers must be clearly demarcated. Calvin went to the Bible for his model, but, unlike Zwingli, he resorted to the New Testament alone for guidance in this area.

So important was ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church, that Calvin devoted about five hundred pages of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559) to that subject. Once he discovered the principles of correct polity in the New Testament, the Reformer resolved to implement them consistently, an effort that involved him in years of conflict with city magistrates who resisted any diminution of their authority over religion. Calvin's desire to free the church from state control initiated a struggle that lasted fifteen years, a period during which he was sometimes in danger because of the animosity his proposals provoked.

Despite the hardships he endured, Calvin's teaching prevailed. Great was his service as a theologian, but no less great was his contribution as a churchman. In restoring the New Testament rule by elders, he gave the laity a half-share in the government of the church. One effect of this was to bring pastors and people together to discredit the idea of a sacerdotal clergy spiritually superior to ordinary Christians. A second effect was to encourage people to demand the right to govern themselves and thereby initiate resistance to tyrannies.

Calvin's influence was due not only to the system of doctrine he composed but also to the republican form of government he implemented in the church. Wherever his teaching gained acceptance, people began to demand their rights as *citizens*, not *subjects*, of the state. He did not advocate democracy in the modern usage of that term, yet the freest nations of the contemporary world are still those in which his teaching has the deepest roots.

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