

# Presbyterianism :

## ✻ A Historical Sketch ✻

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A Sermon preached at the Installation  
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E. C. Murray, D. D., Graham. N. C.

# PRESBYTERIANISM : A HISTORICAL SKETCH.

BY REV. E. C. MURRAY, D. D.

TEXT : "The Lord loveth the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob.

"Glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God. Selah."

"And of Zion it shall be said, This and that man was born in her : and the Highest himself shall establish her.

The Lord shall count, when he writeth up the people, *that this man* was born there. Selah.

"As well the singers as the players on instruments *shall be there* : all my springs are in thee."

The Lord delights in his church ; He "loveth the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob." To be a member of the church is an exalted privilege : Glorious things are spoken of thee, O City of God . . . . of Zion it shall be said, This and that man was born in her ; and the Highest Himself shall establish her. The Lord shall count, when he writeth up the people, that this man was born there. They that sing shall say, All my fountains are in thee." And especially may we feel a glow of worthy pride in the thought that we belong to the church that exemplifies the original principles of government and worship, and most faithfully conserves the ancient traditions.

Presbyterianism is that system which regards the church as a spiritual com-

wealth composed of the families of believers. Its only Head and Lord is Christ. He governs his church through courts composed of presbyters (elders) or bishops. These presbyter-bishops are all of one order and of equal authority. The temporal affairs of the church are administered by deacons. All officers are elected by the members and ordained by the courts. Each congregation is governed by its session, composed of several elders. The organic unity of the whole church is realized through an ascending series of courts of jurisdiction—Session, Presbytery, Synod, and General Assembly.

Now let us trace the origin and historical development of these principles. The church as an organized society dates back to the time when God called Abraham out of heathendom, set apart his family as a peculiar people unto the Lord, made a special covenant with them and appointed circumcision as the seal of the covenant to be administered to the faithful and their offspring. The government of this primitive church was patriarchal, the head of the family, or elder, combining in himself all the functions of government, discipline and worship.

As this one family grew into many, governmental authority was vested not only in the various heads of households individually, but in the heads of families and tribes collectively. Through these representatives God dealt with his peo-

ple (Ex. 3:16). They administered government (Deut. 22:15-19, 25:7); and discipline (Deut. 21:18-19); and lead in worship (Lev. 4:15, Deut. 31:9-12. And finally Moses was directed to organize a supreme court of elders to exercise jurisdiction over the whole nation—the first Presbyterian General Assembly (Num. 11:16-17). Here we find already an ascending series of courts, composed of elders of households, of families, of tribes and of the nation

After the Babylonish captivity we note a further development of this Presbyterian system, preparatory to the Christian dispensation. Synagogues were organized, each governed by a court of at least three elders, called “rulers of the synagogue,” (Mark 5:22, etc.) Jesus warned his disciples: “They will deliver you up to their sessions, and they will scourge you in their synagogues,” (Matt. 10:17). Each synagogue had also its board of deacons. And there was established at Jerusalem a supreme court of elders. “The Presbytery came together and led him into their session,” (Luke 22:66). Paul appealed to “the high priest and the whole Presbytery” (Acts 22:5). In all these passages I translate the Greek literally.

The Christian Church retained the familiar organization and worship of the syangogue. Archbishop Whateley says: “The apostles did not so much form a Christian church, as make an existing congregation Christian, leaving the ma-

chinery of government unchanged." And Bishop Lightfoot, the most learned of all the English bishops, says: "They would naturally adopt the normal government of the synagogue, and a body of elders would be chosen to direct religious worship."

The Apostle James applied the very name "synagogue" to the Christian church (Jas. 2:2). We find the same old officers, elders and deacons, in the new organization (1 Tim. 3, Tit. 1); The terms elder and bishop were applied interchangeably to the same office (Acts 20:17, 28. Tit. 1:5, 7). These officers performed the same duties as formerly, the elders "ruling and laboring in word and doctrine" (1 Tim. 5:17), and the deacons caring for the material welfare of the church (Acts 6:1-6). The presbyters were organized in the same ascending series of courts; each congregation was governed by its session, the apostles "having elders elected in every church" (Acts 14:23); Timothy was ordained by "the laying on of the hands of Presbytery" (1 Tim. 4:14; and a dispute in the Presbytery of Antioch was settled by an appeal to the Synod of Jerusalem (Acts 15:2, 16:4). The worship also of the Christian church contained the same simple spiritual elements as that of the synagogue. The Apostolic Church therefore was certainly neither congregational nor prelatical, but Presbyterian.

It is evident now why we do not con-



cern ourselves about the question of apostolic succession. The Presbyterian church was 2,000 years old before the apostles were born; they were reared in it and served it; and one of the greatest of them gloried in the fact that he was one of its presbyters. "The elders I exhort, who also am an elder: feed the flock of God, taking the oversight thereof, not as being lords of God's heritage, but bring ensamples to the flock" (1 Pet. 5:1-3). So spoke the apostle whom the Church of Rome claims as its first primate.

As to the post-apostolic period, the scholarly Bishop of Salisbury declares that throughout the early church, even at Rome and Alexandria, down to the third century, its government was Presbyterian. Deans Stanley and Milman are of the opinion that "nothing like modern episcopacy existed before the second century." And Bishop Lightfoot testifies that "Presbytery is not a later growth out of Episcopacy, but Episcopacy is a later growth out of Presbytery."

What then were the causes of the decline of Presbyterianism? The preaching elder became gradually regarded as superior to the others, and those of large city churches as superior to the country ministers. Ambitious presbyters usurped more and more authority, and became "lords over God's heritage." By-and-by they assumed episcopal authority over

the whole neighborhood, and thus arose the diocesan Bishop.

Again, the church began to imitate in its worship the rites and ceremonies of the Jewish and heathen temples, and we hear of priests and altars and sacrifices. The deacon became a levite, the presbyter a priest, and the bishop a high priest. And so sacerdotalism became the dominant idea of the ministry, and a tide of ritualism and clericalism swept over the church.

The union of Church and State under Constantine in the fourth century resulted in a conformity in civil and ecclesiastical government. A regular gradation of church officers was instituted, bishops over dioceses, archbishops over districts, metropolitan bishops over provinces, exarchs over several provinces, and patriarchs over empire. Of the latter the patriarchs of Constantinople and Rome became preeminent; and thus arose the two ecclesiastical empires, the Greek and the Roman Catholic churches.

Thus republican Presbyterianism gradually degenerated into aristocratic Episcopacy, and finally into despotic Papacy.

This, however, was not accomplished without opposition. Ambrose, in the fourth century, protested: "The synagogue, and afterwards the church, had elders, without whose counsel nothing was to be done; which grew into disuse, by what negligence I know not, unless by the cloth, or rather the pride, of the teachers (preachers) while they alone

wished to appear something." So also Jerome: "Little by little the presbyters were defrauded out of their original rights. A presbyter is the same as a bishop; and before these were, by the devil's instigation, parties in religion . . . . the churches were governed by the common counsel of the presbyters. But afterwards it was determined that one presbyter should be set above the rest, to whom all the care of the churches should belong. So let the bishops know that they are above the presbyters more by the esteem of the church than by the true dispensation of Christ."

The church was never without faithful witnesses against prelatical government, ritualistic worship and heretical doctrines. "There were from the beginning of the Middle Ages down to the Reformation large exceptions from the principles of episcopal government which can be called by no other name than presbyterian," (Bishop Lightfoot). In the mountains of Northwestern Italy and Southeastern France the Waldensees from very early times resisted the encroachments of Papacy in the face of furious persecutions and inhuman tortures that make one of the darkest bloodiest chapters in history. In 1880, their representative to our alliance of Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian system, said: "We cannot call ourselves a reformed church because we have never been deformed." Here are two articles in their constitution, written several



hundred years before the Reformation:  
“The duties of our pastors are to preach the word, administer the sacraments, and watch over the people, together with the elders and deacons, according to the practice of the primitive churches.”

“Our pastors do call assemblies once every year, to determine of all affairs in a general Synod.”

The Church of Scotland was another witness to the truth in the Dark Ages. Do you know that Saint Patrick, whom the Irish Catholics worship as their patron saint, was really a Scotch Presbyterian missionary? In the fifth century he evangelized Ireland, organizing 365 churches and ordaining over them 365 bishops or pastors and 3,000 elders. In 563 A. D., Columba established on the island of Iona, off the west coast of Scotland, a mission station and college. This became the great missionary organization of those times, sending evangelists through Scotland, Britain, France, Germany and Switzerland, and spreading the pure gospel for 300 years. These Christians were called Culdees, because they were governed by Culdei or elders. Their preachers were ordained by elders and all called bishops. For 500 years they struggled with Rome. English writers of the eighth century testify to the rejection of Romish ceremonies, doctrines and traditions, their simple forms of worship, and their republican government. These principles were never eradicated in Scotland, and when John Knox

preached a revival of Presbyterianism it was accepted readily.

This brings us to the Reformation of the sixteenth century. Nearly all of the great reformers affirmed the original government of the church by presbyters; and the reformed churches of Switzerland, Hungary, Moravia, Germany, France, Holland and Scotland embodied the Presbyterian church that adopted the prelatical system was that of England; because the reformation there was under the auspices of the kings; and as the astute James I. observed, "Monarchy doth agree with presbytery as God doth agree with the devil."

John Calvin devoted his illustrious talents to organizing a church in Geneva, Switzerland, on strictly biblical principles, in doctrine, government and worship. Geneva with its schools, theological seminary and printing establishments became a center of religious influence, the inspiration of protestantism, and a model for other churches. And the republican principles there taught and exemplified became also the great formation influence in modern political commonwealths.

The Presbyterian Church of France (Huguenots) was for a time the greatest protestant church of Europe. At the massacre of Saint Bartholomew 75,000 were butchered in Paris and elsewhere; and within thirty years nearly one million were martyred. After the revoca-

tion of the Edict of Nantes the devoted church was almost annihilated.

One of the most glorious chapters in Presbyterian history was the struggle of the sturdy Hollanders against the bloody Duke of Alva and the Catholic power of Spain, and their final achievement of civil and religious liberty

Among the students who flocked to Geneva was John Knox, of Scotland. He afterwards led in a strenuous fight against papacy in Scotland, and succeeded in having it abolished and Presbyterianism established. Then came another contest for Christ's crown and covenant against the English hierarchy and Monarchy; and so for a century and a half this church had to "wade through bloody seas."

Since the Reformation these Presbyterian principles have been disseminated throughout the world by emigration and evangelization. Their adherents now number, in the United States and Canada, seven million; in Great Britain, five million; in Europe, eleven and a half million; and in other countries, one and a half million; a total of twenty-five million—the largest evangelical denomination in the world.

Our Presbyterian system is the heritage of 4,000 years of glorious history. This was the government of "the Church in the Wilderness," and of the Hebrew Spiritual Commonwealth; after the Babylonish captivity it was providentially modified so as to be admirably

adapted to the conditions of the Christian Church, and the apostles adopted and applied its principles; during the Dark Ages it was the conservator of every vital truth, and its adherents were in the vanguard of the reforming forces; and they have ever since been leaders in the evangelization of the world. Thus it has been transplanted from Egypt to Canaan and from Canaan to Babylon; has been established in cultured Greece and Barbarian Britain; has crossed one ocean to America and another to the Orient; and has been found adapted to every people and to all conditions.

It has borne the shock of war and the rack and flame of persecution; has been baptized with the blood of martyrs, and nourished with the tears and prayers and labors of the most illustrious saints; has trained the noblest men and the grandest churches, and been the foster mother of modern republican liberties and institutions. "It can never die; it will never see the decrepitude of old age; but will live in the unfading freshness of self-renewing youth and the unbroken vigor of manhood to the end of time, and will outlive time itself." Yes, for round about the eternal throne sit four and twenty elders as the representatives of the glorified church, and they "fall down before him that sitteth on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, Thou are worthy, O Lord, and receive glory and hon-

or and power, for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they art and wert created'' (Rev. 4:10-11). There in heaven itself our immortal church still fulfills her mission in hymning the praises and exalting the sovereignty and majesty of her Lord and Saviour.

Let us study the doctrines and history of this grand old church, glory in the record of her past and pray for the success of her future, delight ourselves in her worship and consecrate ourselves to her service. "They that sing shall say, all my fountains are in thee."

