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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

## THE INFLUENCE OF CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH IN GERMANY

WITH this title<sup>1</sup> Dr. John Victor Bredt, Professor in Marburg, has published a Work which for more than one reason deserves the attention of all members of the Reformed Churches in Germany and elsewhere.

To begin with, it is the second volume of a new series of theological studies such as German Calvinists have long desired but have for long not been able to achieve. There have already appeared successive "Contributions to the History and Doctrine of the Reformed Church" by Professor Dr. W. Goeters, Pastor D. W. Kolfhaus, Professor D. Otto Weber-Göttingen, and the writer of this article. The well-known Educational Publishing Company in Neukirchen, which, under the guidance of Pastor Schneider, formerly pastor in Barmen, is forming itself more and more into a workshop of Reformed Literature, practical and scientific, has taken the enterprize in hand most helpfully. Bredt's book is the second of the series; the first, on "Predestination and Responsibility in Calvin" by Dr. Paul Jakobs, appeared in 1937.

The author of the book that concerns us here was for long a member of the Presidential Council of the Reformierte Bund of Germany, and at the same time was very active in politics. He is now Professor of Church-Law, and as such has already published a three-volume Work "New Evangelical Church-Law for Prussia", a work unique both in spirit and character. In this he had already devoted a special chapter to his home-Church which so many of his fore-fathers had served as presbyters in Elberfeld and Barmen-Gemarke. Out of this chapter the new book has grown as a result of much more penetrating and fundamental study including research into archives.

The Church of the Lower Rhine carried over its ancient Presbyterial and Synodal Constitution, although in modified

<sup>1</sup> *Die Verfassung der reformierten Kirche in Cleve-Julich-Berg-Mark.*

form, into the Prussian Union through the Rhenish-Westfalian Church-Order of 1835. It is therefore the mother of all the Presbyterian and Synodal Orders (still further weakened it must be said) which in the nineteenth century gradually found an entrance into all the Evangelical Church Constitutions of Germany. Hence an extensive and still growing literature has dealt with it, its origin, and the Church Life which unfolded itself in its congregations and Synods. Bredt can take the credit of having worked through the material for the first time from the point of view of the jurist and historian of Law, in spite of the older works of Jacobson which offer rather a collection of materials. He writes: "For our Reformed forefathers on the Lower Rhine the Constitution of the Church was something so important that it could not be separated from the nature of the Church. The Church was the house in which they lived intimately, and which coloured their whole lives. Now the framework of this Church consisted in its Constitution" (p. 10).

Now what Bredt understands by the word Constitution is clear from the fourteen sections into which, apart from the Foreword and the Conclusion, the book is divided: The Church (pp. 13-29); The Confession of Faith (pp. 30-50); The Congregations (pp. 51-64); Church Law (pp. 65-72); The Constitution (pp. 78-105); The Preachers (pp. 106-138); The Schools (pp. 139-147); The Presbytery (148-170); The Synods (pp. 171-209); Worship (pp. 210-237); The Sacraments (pp. 238-259); Marriage Law (pp. 260-280); Church and State (pp. 281-312); Financial Management (pp. 313-326). In such a comprehensive scheme many facts hitherto unknown even to the best scholars are brought to light, and many acute observations are made which tempt us to linger over them and discuss them. But the author himself bids us not to judge his work in the details but to read the whole (p. II) and we shall gladly concern ourselves mainly with the Conclusion (pp. 327-338), but must make a few critical remarks on what is brought forward there.

"The Reformed Free Church on the Lower Rhine," so he says, "takes a unique place in German history. Its origin lay in the idea of 'the Community' which here expressed itself in the religious sphere. For the first time in German lands a people itself took its fate into its own hand and chose its own

confession without troubling about the will of any prince. But it was not only a movement of Faith but also a movement of culture, which embraced the whole man and coloured his outward life. Faith and conception of life formed a complete whole; Calvinism showed itself not only in the Worship of the Church but also in the vocational life. So it also happened that the Reformed in Cleve-Julich-Berg-Mark were everywhere the leading merchants. It is a culturally exclusive community that manifests itself on the Lower Rhine, and its traces are still everywhere recognizable" (p. 327).

Who would not rejoice at this energetic acknowledgement of the vitality, freedom and power of evangelical Reformed Christianity? Yet a few sentences as they stand open the door to misunderstandings; e.g. especially "a people itself took its fate in its own hand". Never does a people choose its *faith* for itself, but receives it as a gift; a Church never arises from the people but from the Spirit of the Lord. Brecht naturally would not deny this. The question is simply to understand what is meant by "the idea of community" in which he sees the characteristic feature of the Church of the Lower Rhine.

In the fundamentally important chapter on The Church (pp. 13-29) Brecht gives it as his opinion that the Reformed Church Constitution did not originate with Calvin and Geneva, but that its roots are to be found among the Huguenots in France; for here, in opposition to the Catholic Crown and the old Church, the idea of community found expression. Each believer decides personally to attach himself to the little group of the Reformed; and so arises the community, the Church (p. 15 f.). At the same time this proceeding can have nothing to do with English Congregationalism or Independency, from which the Continental Reformed are clearly distinguished by their Synods (p. 20). Here Brecht is obviously wrong. In reality Calvin was (with obligations to Butzer) the creator of the Reformed *conception of the Church*. Out of this developed the constitution of the congregation, the lowest organization, already to all intents in Geneva. The higher organizations, the Synods, appear about the same time in France, the Netherlands and Scotland. The method of forming a Church according to the Reformed conception is as follows. The Lord of the Church calls forth witnesses to the Gospel and gives them somehow opportunity to preach the Word. His Spirit works living

faith, to begin with at least in a small group. In that living faith lies immediately the impulse to union. Christ plants his disciples as members in His body and so is formed round Word and Sacrament a community of faith, love and discipline, i.e. a congregation. Preferably this happens in alliance with the local authorities, for then the preaching of the Gospel is directed to all and is therefore a public matter—not a matter of obscure corners or conventicles. Where that is wholly impossible the Congregation must nevertheless be planted and maintained, whether in obscurity under the Cross and persecution, or through emigration, or, where it is at all possible through the erection of a free Church alliance by means of Synods, even where the State is otherwise minded. The idea of Community is everywhere of the highest importance. How else could there ever arise such free independent congregations and Synods? But it is not the only factor. Rather the characteristic of the Reformed conception of the Church, and of its Constitution equally, lies in the fact that the idea of Institution and the idea of Community are closely intertwined,—that it is defined indeed in opposition to Catholicism and Lutheranism on the one hand which in reality know only the idea of Religious Institution and on the other hand against Congregationalism which has little more than the idea of Religious community.

In this point of quite fundamental importance Bredt's view must be corrected. But that does not hinder us—to return now to his concluding survey—from rejoicing in his defence of the Reformed Church of the Lower Rhine against the reproaches of such famous authors as Goebel in his *History of the Christian Life*, or Simons in his *Synodal and General-Synodal Book*. When he himself accuses the leading theologians in the Synod of “remarkably servile and sometimes directly unworthy conduct” towards the authorities (p. 333, etc.), the criticism is to be explained in part at least as due to the misconception just mentioned. On the other hand we have complete sympathy with what he notes as a *desideratum* at this point. “What the General-Synod lacked was a Legal Procurator (*Syndicus*), who would not be armed with governmental powers, but who would be in a position to explain to the government ‘in serviceable legal and political form’ the mind and aims of the Church” (p. 334). Incontestably there was a lack here; nevertheless the

yoking of the Synodal Constitution with the Territorial State-Consistorial System as practised since 1835 seems to have been not quite so ruinous as Bredt assumes.

On the last pages of his book stand these significant sentences: "The genuine Calvinistic spirit dwelt much less in the preachers than in the members of the community. . . . The innumerable nameless Elders mostly humble people in insignificant congregations, were the people who gave the Reformed Church its proper impress and maintained it. . . . They knew that the Church could be maintained by no one else save its own members. Therefore they were never backward, even in Julich and Berg, in carrying on difficult struggles with the Catholic Officials and Judges wherever these went beyond their jurisdiction. This continuous if obscure service of the Elders . . . was the most valuable thing which the Reformed Free Church of the Lower Rhine had to show" (p. 336 f.).

These words not only contain a highly satisfactory historical truth but they are also indicative of the spirit that pervades the book of this descendant of a family which has given many Elders to the service of the Church. We have nothing further to add save the wish that the Spirit of God may through the preaching of His Word continue to produce such fruit; that for His Church to-day also such Elders and such members may continue to arise.

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