WHAT IS PRESBYTERIANISM?

WHAT is Presbyterianism? The word first emerges in England at the time of the Westminster Assembly as a nickname for the ecclesiastical polity which the majority in the Assembly together with their Scots allies were endeavouring to introduce into the Church of England. This polity had been set forth much earlier as the only Scriptural polity by Travers and Cartwright in England and by Andrew Melville in Scotland. In England the party of Travers had been suppressed, or had broken up into Independency. In Scotland the followers of Melville had a temporary victory in 1592 and then, after a long eclipse, re-emerged triumphant in 1638 full of eagerness, under the Solemn League and Covenant, to give to England and Ireland as well as to Scotland the polity which now received the name of Presbyterian.

Briefly this meant that the Church should be governed by a hierarchy not of persons but of courts. Each congregation was to have its Consistory or Eldership or Kirk-Session composed of its minister and elders. Neighbouring congregations were to be associated under the jurisdiction of a Presbytery consisting of their ministers with one or more elders from each congregation. Presbyteries were to be grouped in Provincial Synods, and the national Church would be governed by a National or General Assembly. The plan did not stop there, for it was conceived that national Churches would be associated in some kind of Ecumenical Council. So Presbyterianism had from the beginning an Ecumenical outlook.

This plan was drawn up in opposition to the Episcopal form of Church government retained at the Reformation in England and introduced into Scotland under James VI. But at Westminster it had to be defended chiefly against the Independents who held that each local congregation is an independent, self-sufficing unit of Church life which may not rightly be subordinated to any superior judicatory. The debate was prolonged. Memoranda were submitted by both sides. Answers followed and counter-answers; and all were published by order of Parliament. The polity as a whole was under debate, but the storm-centre was the Presbytery. Hence the name Presbyterian for

those who maintained its " due right ". Coined by the Independents the name soon came to be used by the Anglicans who had experimented with the name Consistorians as a term of abuse. But, as so often happens, a name applied in scorn was accepted as an honourable appellation by those to whom it was applied, and is still so accepted by their descendants in Scotland, England, Ireland, the nations of the British Commonwealth, the United States, and by the Younger Churches which derive from the missionary activity of the English-speaking Presbyterian Churches.

The name Presbyterian arose out of what we may call the accidents of British history. Consequently it is not in common use outside the English-speaking world. But the thing itself exists elsewhere, in fact in many European countries. The French Reformed Church was the first, in 1559, to adopt the polity which in Britain is called Presbyterian. The Dutch Reformed Church soon followed; then some *Landeskirchen* in Germany, notably the Palatinate. Similar organisation is found in the Reformed Churches of Switzerland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Italy and elsewhere. John Knox was only one of many from all parts of Western Europe who found in Calvin's Geneva " the most perfect school of Christ on earth since the Apostles ", and who spent their lives in expanding its influence in their homelands. The Churches which they established are now all included in what English-speaking people call the Presbyterian Alliance, but which is officially styled " The Alliance of Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System." Presbyterianism is therefore not a peculiarity of the otherwise peculiar people who inhabit the northern and wilder parts of this island. It is the polity instituted by Calvin in Geneva, at any rate in germ, and adapted by those Churches throughout Europe which looked to Geneva as their cradle to their varying situations in territories more extensive than those of a city state. It is the normal ecclesiastical form of the Reformed Church. To understand what Presbyterianism is we must understand the nature of the Genevan Reformation as a whole.

I

By the beginning of the sixteenth century it had long been universally recognised throughout the Western Church that

some kind of Reformation was urgently necessary. But there agreement ceased. The General Councils of the fifteenth century had largely failed and had, so far, discredited Episcopalism and Conciliarism. The Papacy had a vested interest in many of the current abuses and could not remedy them. Secular national governments had been consolidating their power and extending their jurisdiction to ecclesiastical matters. Clearly the State would have a good deal of say in any project for reform. There was the Renaissance affecting the educated classes, with its aversion to scholastic dogmatism and its enthusiasm for " good letters ", including the New Testament. Then came the religious revolt touched off by Luther's attack on a peculiarly flagrant instance of the traffic in Indulgences.

The history of the Reformation can, of course, be told from an exclusively political, or even from a social-economic angle, and these aspects are real enough. But it is violently unhistorical to dismiss as mere ideology the work of the religious and theological reformers. Luther, Zwingli, Butzer, Melanchthon, Cranmer, Calvin, have all had a real part in determining the movement of history as a whole. Of these I claim that Calvin's influence has been historically the greatest. From the moment when in 1536, at the age of twenty-seven, he published the first edition of his *Institutio Religionis Christianae* he stood in the front rank of the Reformation theologians. And from 1555 when, after prolonged struggle, he had firmly established himself in Geneva, he became the most influential theological figure in Western Europe. Doubtless he did not achieve all his ideal even in Geneva. In Germany Lutheranism, and in England Anglicanism, followed other guides. Elsewhere secular governments had interests of their own. Possibly Calvin was somewhat doctrinaire in his aim to reform the Church on the exact pattern he believed to see revealed in the New Testament and reflected in the earlier Christian ages. But his enterprise won the devoted allegiance of eager disciples throughout western Europe, not least in England. It has been complained that Calvinism created trouble wherever it came. Rather Calvin equipped the Reformed Church to confront the modern state with a Scriptural doctrine and praxis, and with the conviction that Christ alone is King and Head of His Church.

II

Like all the Reformers Calvin distinguished between the Visible and Invisible Church, a distinction that goes back to Augustine. We are told it is not to be found in the New Testament, but something suggestive of it can be felt by comparing the Epistle to the Ephesians with those to the Corinthians. In any case in the New Testament the Church is a part of the divine plan but is not identical with the Kingdom of God. For Calvin the distinction is chiefly important as a reminder that Divine Grace *is* the *esse* of the Church. The Visible Church no less than the Invisible is an object of faith, because it is a divinely appointed means of grace for all men. On no pretext of personal holiness, religious experience, Scripture knowledge, or assurance of salvation may any Christian withdraw from the Visible Church, outside of which there is no ordinary means of salvation. The stress on this Cyprianic formula is terrific. It has been urged that the doctrine of Predestination must rob the Church of significance, but it never seems to have worked in that way. For Calvin as for Augustine it gives the Church its religious significance. Certainly reformed theologians cannot be accused of making light of the Church. Lutherans in fact accuse Calvinists of catholicising in the doctrine of the Church.

What are, then, the observable marks of the Church Visible? With Luther, Calvin says: " The Word truly preached, and the Gospel Sacraments (Baptism and the Lord's Supper) rightly administered." But with these he insists on the administration of discipline. Here we encounter three basic features of the Reformed Churches.

1. There is the stress laid upon doctrine. One of the most characteristic features of the Calvinist Reformation is the multitude of Confessional documents which it produced. Each Reformed Church seemed to find it necessary at the very beginning of its life to draw up a *Confessio Fidei*. It was not because there was diversity of view. Quite the contrary. Each new Confession was a new testimony to the doctrine held in common. All agree in theological content and vary only in length and elaboration, down to the latest, longest and most elaborate, the Westminster Confession. They all embody the substance of the ancient creeds. In that sense the Reformed doctrine was orthodox, and Servetus was condemned and burnt at Geneva for his denial

of the doctrine of the Trinity. But they included also the Augustinian doctrines of sin and grace, which had hitherto been left to the speculations and opinions of the theologians and had not been pronounced to be *de fide*. This was to exclude the alleged Pelagianising or semi-Pelagianising of much mediaeval teaching. Finally they included the special Reformation doctrines of the supremacy of Scripture and justifying faith.

In addition, however, to testifying to the orthodoxy of their authors and their agreement with other Reformed Churches, these Confessions were intended to fix the standard of doctrine to be taught and preached to the people, so that they might be instructed and grounded in saving faith. The Church's first business was to ensure that its members would be not mere nominal believers but instructed and whole-hearted confessors of the Faith. The Reformed Confessions are apt to look more like systems of theology than creeds, and in modern times many have felt them to be strait-waistcoats for theologians. More recently, however, the necessity for doctrinal preaching has again become apparent, and the importance of a Confessional document of some kind is again widely recognised.

The Reformed Confessions claim to be no more than subordinate standards, subordinate to and reformable by the supreme standard, which is the Word of God. Calvin is best known now as the author of the *Institutio*, but in his own view he was above everything else an expositor of the Scriptures. His published Commentaries, covering nearly the whole Bible, are still of value, and show how a sense of historical and literary values can be combined with a sure grasp of doctrinal truth. The *Institutio* claims to be simply an abstract of Biblical doctrine, and the Confessions profess to be no more. Calvin and his disciples are first and always expositors. Theology is Scripture exposition. The Word of God, which is to be heard in the Bible, it is the preacher's function to make audible to the Christian people.

2. The Reformed Churches, to all appearances, broke away from the traditional forms of worship much more drastically than did Lutherans and Anglicans. Festivals and Saints' Days were abolished, while the Lord's Day was given increased sanctity and veneration as pre-eminently the Day of public worship. Churches were bared of their ornaments as vestiges of " idolatry ". Vestments, ritual and ceremony were reduced to a minimum.

The distinction between chancel and nave was abolished, a token that worship was no priestly function with the people looking on. It was to be congregational worship, with the people singing the Psalms in metre set to easy tunes which are becoming appreciated once more. The Mass gave place to a congregational communion. It appears that Calvin's intention was that every Lord's Day service should lead up to the Eucharist with all Church members partaking. But owing to opposition due largely to traditional practice he had to be content with a quarterly communion. Infrequent communion has been the rule in the Reformed Churches, not because it was undervalued, but for the opposite reason that it was regarded as an occasion of special solemnity and dignity. In Scotland at all events what were called Communion Seasons were and still are impressive occasions in Church life.

The prominence given to the sermon in Reformed Church worship is notorious. No service was complete without a sermon, whereas the Eucharist was frequently lacking. This seems to imply that the Word was stressed above the Sacraments. Maybe it tended to be so in reaction to the contrary abuse which was the prevailing one. But possibly Reformed preaching may be said to have a sacramental aspect. In Scotland the custom was for the Bible to be ceremoniously carried into the pulpit, the minister being then ushered in with equal ceremony for his task of expounding the Word of God. To the reading " but especially the preaching " of the Word was attributed an efficacity for salvation which no doubt it often had, not by any means solely by its appeal to the intellect. " That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye may have fellowship with us, and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ." No apology is required for the fact that the Reformed ministry was pre-eminently a preaching ministry.

3. The third mark of the Church Visible is Discipline. Of all Church members there is demanded not only confession of faith but also a certain standard of moral living. The Christian life was to be lived, not in the monastery, but amid the ordinary duties of daily life, in the family, in business, in the state. In all these spheres the Christian was to find his God-given vocation and an opportunity to fulfil his chief end on earth, i.e. to glorify God. Nevertheless the Puritan ideal has some resemblances to the monastic ideal. It is austere, even ascetic. It even produces

sometimes the typical monastic sins of accidie and censoriousness. Calvin, however, did not aim at the perfectionism of the rigorist sects. He recognised that no external discipline could secure a community of perfect saints. The Church is inevitably a mixed body excluding from its communion only notoriously gross sinners who are openly contemptuous of the Christian ethic. The Church function was to edify its members in love, to endeavour by every means to increase holiness in them, by exhortation, by pastoral care, and only as a last resort by ecclesiastical discipline, administered by elders, prudent godly men chosen from the people and associated for this purpose with the pastors.

This characteristic institution of the Reformed Churches has, of course, been severely criticised, but it was meant to meet a felt need. The Reformation originated with a religious and ethical protest against an abuse of discipline through the Indulgence traffic. Some better way had to be found. It was surely right to take discipline out of the hands of professional clerics who had so abused it, and restore to the Christian community in some fashion its long-lost powers in this matter, and Calvin's own teaching about the loving care of souls necessary for the right exercise of disciplinary power is quite admirable. But there is the question of its practical working. At any rate it was here that the Reformed Church encountered the stiffest opposition. Even at Geneva the magistrates and council would not hand over ecclesiastical discipline to a purely Church Consistory and insisted on nominating the lay elders. Later Erastus attacked the whole idea of excommunication. In England the consistorial system was attacked both by Anglicans and by the Puritan, John Milton, author of the famous tag, " New Presbyter is but old Priest writ large ". There has undoubtedly been a seamy side to the Reformed Church discipline, though there was doubtless also a nobler side. Now that it has practically disappeared there remains the problem of finding a better method of dealing pastorally with those who fall short of the Christian standard of life.

III

The Germans have drawn an interesting distinction between two conceptions of the Church—as authoritative established institution (*Anstalt*) and as voluntary association (*Gemeinde*). The

distinction is important as it has something to do with the Great Divide between "Catholic" and "Protestant" recognised with all proper caution at Amsterdam. Caution is certainly necessary. From the beginning the Church was and must always continue to be *both* Anstalt *and* Gemeinde. Exclusive emphasis on one side or the other leads to fatal error. Lutherans and Anglicans often charge the Calvinists with over-emphasising the association-aspect of the Church. It is true that some of the manifestations of Calvinism in England, e.g. Independents and Baptists, did in fact hold the theory of the "gathered" Church, a body of believers in voluntary association in which all Church authority derives from the membership. But they would rightly object to such authority being described as being "from below". The theory of the "gathered" Church perhaps is due to the fact that the state with its own ecclesiastical establishment was hostile to dissenters and non-conformists, who were in consequence thrown back on their own resources, on the loyalty of their faithful people. Calvinism bred "Free" Churches where the magistrate was hostile. This was something quite new in the sixteenth century and was to have much to do with the development of civil and religious liberty. Troeltsch has also pointed out how important it may be in the future should the state become neutral or worse towards all forms of Christianity.

Calvinism bred Free Churches, but the Free Church principle was by no means a necessary ingredient in it. Calvin assumed that the whole body of the citizens of Geneva would be, by compulsion if necessary, baptised members of the Church from infancy, a legacy from the Middle Ages. Moreover, while he insisted strongly that the Church had a government of its own instituted by God and deriving its authority from Christ its Head, and therefore distinct from the civil magistracy, he held as strongly that Church and State could and should co-operate, the State recognising the spiritual freedom of the Church. The Church is *Heiligungs-Anstalt*, whose function is by Word, Sacraments and discipline to seek to make the natural political *Gemeinde* as far as possible into a truly Christian *Gemeinde*, an ambitious project with many obvious difficulties and not a few pitfalls for zealots; but not an ignoble project. To this view of the Church the Reformed Churches of the central tradition have faithfully adhered. They have maintained the spiritual independence of the Church, but they have repudiated the Sects.

Their fortunes have been very varied, depending on the varied attitudes of governments. In some lands they have been " established ", in others they have been persecuted, but generally they have maintained the view of their original theologian.

According to Reformed teaching, the Church is a divinely given means of salvation, entrusted with the requisite purely spiritual powers, doctrinal, legislative and judicial, all in strict subordination to the Word of God. These powers are exercised by ecclesiastical officers, collectively styled the ministry, deriving their authority from Christ, the Sole King and Head of the Church. Calvin searched the New Testament to discover what offices had existed in the Primitive Apostolic Church, and of course found there had been many forms of ministry. Some he thought were temporary and extraordinary, e.g. Apostles, Prophets, miracle-workers, even evangelists. Others were permanent and ordinary, Pastors and Teachers (Eph. iv. 11), Helps and Governments (1 Cor. xii. 28), Deacons (*passim* and especially Acts vi). No doubt there is a certain arbitrariness in this selection, especially when the rule of Pastors, Teachers, Elders and Deacons was raised to the rank of dogma as, e.g. by Cartwright. Well might Hooker argue that this system was far from clear even in the New Testament and could not possibly be made an article of faith. Calvin perhaps hardly regarded it as such. And possibly he was guided to his selection of these four offices by the fact that the life and work of the Church require (i) the ministry of Word and Sacraments; (ii) the exercise of discipline; (iii) administration of finance and care of the sick and the poor; (iv) Christian education. These functions had all been performed but often corruptly in the mediaeval Church. The purpose of reform was to ensure that they would be performed effectively.

But what is the relation of the Reformed ministry of Pastors, Doctors, Elders and Deacons to the traditional ministry of Bishops, Presbyters and Deacons? It is true Calvin discarded the names, except Deacon, to which he gave an entirely new meaning. Presbyter was difficult. On the one hand it appeared that in the New Testament Presbyter and Bishop were different names for the same office, but traditionally Presbyter had come to mean Priest (*sacerdos*) and Calvin rejected wholly the idea of priesthood of men in the Church. He preferred therefore to call his " governors " Elders (*seniores*) to avoid question. If we

bear in mind that what was important was function rather than title, and that Doctors were, in the new order as in the old, academic rather than ecclesiastical functionaries, there seems to be no reason why we should not say that the Reformed ministry is a three-fold one of Bishops, Presbyters and Deacons, in which the Bishop is the actual Pastor of what we used to call in Scotland "a particular Kirk", and not as in the unreformed Church a magnate who was the merely nominal "Pastor" of an extensive diocese, and commonly neglected his pastoral functions. It is sometimes maintained that one of the fundamental doctrines of Presbyterianism is the Parity of Presbyters. I believe that the original form of the doctrine and its real meaning is that the Pastor, as minister of the Word and Sacraments, is the true Bishop, the chief and indeed the essential minister in the Church. The effect of this doctrine was the scrupulous care taken for the appointment of worthy, conscientious and effective Pastors of congregations, neglect of which was notorious in the unreformed Church and was one of the chief Puritan gravamina against the Elizabethan establishment.

There is, however, one important question which is acute at the moment and deserves more attention than it commonly receives from Reformed theologians. It concerns the continuity of the Church, and is linked with the special problem of Apostolic Succession. For Calvin the essential continuity is continuity in doctrine, and he and his immediate disciples made little of continuity of persons. The Apostolic succession of bishops has surprisingly little place in the Reformation controversies, possibly because for long bishoprics had been mere pieces in the game between Kings and Popes. When the matter was raised, as e.g. by Sadolet, Calvin could treat it lightly as a false trail. But he and his followers did maintain that the ordination of Pastors was a solemn and sacred act, the final act by which those who were called to the office were set apart to fulfil its duties. Normally they retained the ceremony of laying-on of hands by those who were already in the pastoral office. In controversy with the Independents later the Presbyterians stressed the succession of Pastors through the Roman ages back to the apostles, and they have jealously guarded the succession since. Some now maintain that there was no real break at the Reformation and that there has been since apostolic times a *continua successio presbyterorum*. Others, however, have held that at the

Reformation there was an " extraordinary " divine intervention for the purpose of purifying and reforming the Church. Continuity with the apostles demanded a break in a succession that was leading far from their doctrine and life.

The new status given to the Pastor of the individual congregation, and the new stress laid on his work was at the time the most striking novelty in the Genevan Reformation. But the Reformed Church was not " congregationalist " in theory. Neighbouring congregations, as I have said, were grouped under Presbyteries which exercised supervision over all their life, with the duty and the right to " visit " and correct where necessary. Above all the Presbytery had the responsibility of shepherding a congregation which was without a pastor, and with carrying through the long and careful procedures required to find one. When all the numerous tests had been successfully passed, the Presbytery ordained the new Pastor with the laying-on of hands by its members who were already in the pastoral office. The Presbytery, therefore, not the congregation, is the self-sufficient unit of Church life in Presbyterianism. It may be regarded as the Episcopate in commission, but it seems to me to correspond rather to the episcopal synod which in the Eastern Church of the fourth century had similar responsibilities. But even the Presbytery was not entirely self-sufficient. It was amenable to the jurisdiction of the Provincial Synod, and that in turn to the National Assembly. And the vision included a culmination of the system in the Ecumenical Council. Thus the local Church was set in the frame-work of the Church Universal.

Negatively the Reformation was a corrective, a necessary corrective, in view of the manifold abuses which the traditional Church was manifestly unable to remedy. But positively too its achievement has been impressive. And its success has been due to its insistence on the first importance of the pastoral office, the ministry of Word and Sacraments, and ordinances of religion to the people, whereby the Church of God becomes visible and does its part in fulfilling His saving purpose among men; while at the same time the Catholicity of the Church in its wholeness has never been suffered to fall into oblivion.

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