

Foundations of Presbyterianism

I. Introductory Concepts

A. Terms

1. “Calvinism”
 - a. The “five points” of TULIP from the Synod of Dort (1618-19)
 - b. Sometimes used of Reformed theology in general
 - c. Often of just soteriology
2. “Reformed”
 - a. More comprehensive term
 - b. Includes Covenant Theology—the system of orthodox Reformed belief
 - c. Not necessarily Presbyterian (e.g., Reformed Baptists) but usually so
3. “Presbyterian”
 - a. Essentially a term of *polity*
 - b. The distinguishing term of English-speaking Reformed churches

B. Elements of Presbyterianism

1. Nature
 - a. From Greek word for “elder”: *presbyter*
 - b. Refers to levels of *representative* govt.
 - c. All clergy equal—No hierarchy of bishops
2. Levels
 - a. Session
 - 1) Board of elders (presbyters) who rule
 - a) Elders: Spiritual rule/oversight—*Teaching* and *ruling* elders
 - b) Deacons: Oversee physical aspects of the church
 - 2) Possessing delegated powers—ruling the congregation
 - 3) Some powers reserved to the congregation (depending on group)
 - a) Usually right to call pastor and elect elders (subject to presbytery approval)
 - b) Often major expenditures (e.g., building construction)
 - c) Controversial point: Ownership of property
 - b. Presbytery
 - 1) Combined sessions
 - 2) Real basic element of a Presbyterian church
 - 3) Often possess elements of self-rule & independence
 - c. Synod: Meetings of presbyteries
 - d. General Assembly: Meeting of synods—highest body, court of appeals
3. Importance of delegated/reserved powers at each level
4. Ramifications of Presbyterian organization
 - a. Disciplinary power (if exercised)
 - b. Potential influence by hierarchy/bureaucracy

II. Historical Foundations

A. Founders

1. Ulrich Zwingli
 - a. Reformer of Zurich, contemporary w/ Luther
 - b. Marked austerity of Reformed worship: “Four bare walls and a sermon”
 - c. Prefigured elements of covenant theology in controversy w/ Anabaptists

2. John Calvin
 - a. Reformer of Geneva
 - b. Real fountainhead of Reformed theology and practice
 - c. From Augustinian tradition: Stress on sin & grace, predestination, sovereignty of God
 - d. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*: First systemization of Protestant theology
 - e. Challenge of “Calvin vs. the Calvinists” (on, e.g., double predestination & inerrancy)
 3. John Knox of Scotland
 - a. Applied Reformed system to Scotland: “Scotland is his monument”
 - b. Did not actually establish Presbyterianism in Scotland—too much to do in too little time
 - c. First Scots Confession (1560; by Knox & others)
 - 1) Did not actually prescribe a polity but sought doctrinal definition
 - 2) Eventually superseded by Westminster standards
 - d. Proposed a *Book of Discipline* for thorough reform, but did not see it enacted
 4. Andrew Melville
 - a. “Father of Presbyterianism”/“Architect of Scottish Presbyterianism”
 - 1) Fought against episcopacy for presbyterian system
 - 2) Great initial defender in Scotland of “*jure divino* Presbyterianism” (Schaff), that presbyterian polity is divinely ordained
 - b. Saw General Assembly adopt Second Book of Discipline (1578, a revision of Knox’s unenacted First Book)—a major step toward presbyterian polity
 - c. Clashed with James VI/I
- B. Reformed Reformation Principles
1. Regulative principle of worship
 - a. Elements in worship may be only those commanded by Scripture
 - b. Normative principle: One may keep whatever is not forbidden in Scripture (Luther)
 - c. Example: Exclusive psalmody
 2. Marks of the true church (Martin Bucer, John Knox)
 - a. Marks listed
 - 1) Gospel rightly preached
 - 2) Sacraments rightly performed
 - 3) Church discipline rightly practiced
 - b. Provides a rationale for the separatist position
 3. Redemption of society? “Christ the Transformer of Culture” (Niebuhr)
- C. Westminster Standards
1. Context: Puritan controversy
 - a. Puritanism: Movement to purify the Church of England of “popish” elements
 - b. Divisions over polity
 - 1) Presbyterian polity dominant among English Puritans (but large minority held to congregational polity)
 - 2) Congregational polity dominant among New England Puritans (although small minority held to other forms)
 - 3) Puritanism does **not** equal Presbyterianism
 2. Westminster Assembly (1643-49)
 - a. Held during English Civil War to unite England and Scotland

- b. Both Scottish Presbyterians and English Puritan “presbyterians” present
 - 3. Westminster Standards
 - a. Westminster Confession
 - b. Larger and Shorter Catechisms
 - 4. Significance
 - a. Standards for worldwide Presbyterianism
 - b. Other versions
 - 1) Congregationalists: Savoy Declaration
 - 2) Baptists: London Confession of Faith & Keach’s Catechism
 - 5. Questions of Adherence
 - a. Subscription (declared obedience and submission to)
 - b. Scruples (reservations)
- D. Influence of Scottish Heritage
 - 1. Westminster Standards
 - 2. Covenanters
 - 3. Secession churches: Separatists from Church of Scotland (18th century)
 - 4. Scots-Irish
 - a. Scots settled in northern Ireland—a major component
 - b. Backbone of American Presbyterianism