

THE PALIMPSEST

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European Beginnings

As the sixteenth century opened in Europe, society was in turmoil. The discovery of America in 1492 widened the physical horizons of Europeans; the publication of Luther's Ninety-five Theses in 1517 changed the spiritual horizon of a people once dominated by the Church of Rome. These two events were related: the social and intellectual ferment of the Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had brought, on the one hand, discovery and exploration in the physical world, and on the other hand, protest and reform in the spiritual realm.

Church reform — the Protestant Reformation — swept rapidly through Europe, and Christendom commenced to break asunder. Before twenty years had passed, two main branches of Protestantism could be seen — the followers of Martin Luther, and the followers of John Calvin.

Of French birth, Calvin had established himself permanently in Switzerland by 1541, and to Geneva students from all over Europe came to study

under him. His *Institutes of the Christian Religion* — published in 1536 — has never been surpassed as a statement of the Protestant position.

Calvin stressed the sovereignty of God and the preaching of His Word; and he insisted that laymen should be fully instructed in the Scriptures. He wrote lengthy commentaries on the Bible, which are still used. He retained but two of the seven sacraments of the Church of Rome — Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Expositions of Old Testament Law and New Testament Grace, together with prayers and the singing of Psalms — such was the simple Reformed evangel as preached by Calvin for a quarter of a century.

As an architect of church government, Calvin had no rival among the Protestants. Infallible biblical patterns were resurrected as the model for the Reformed churches. Government was by elders or presbyters, as in the early Church. Deacons were appointed for the relief of the poor, and a hospital was established. The church and the city of Geneva came under the scrutiny of the "venerable company" of pastors and teachers, while the "consistory" of pastors and elders further strengthened the moral life.

To Geneva in 1554 came John Knox of Scotland, to study under Calvin. In 1559 Knox returned to Scotland, there to establish the Reformed (Calvinistic) forms on the Scottish "kirk" in spite of the opposition of Catholic Mary, Queen of

Scots. Scottish Presbyterianism stems from John Knox and his church, resting in turn on the experience gained by Knox at Geneva.

Meanwhile, in England, after false starts and stops under Henry VIII, Edward VI, and "Bloody Mary," Protestantism, as expressed in the Church of England, became firmly established under the great Elizabeth. But many felt that the Anglican Church was still too close to the Church of Rome, that it needed "purifying." From these came the Puritans who were among the first to sow the seeds of England's empire in the New World, and to become the forefathers of Congregationalism. In England and especially in Scotland, Presbyterianism flourished and for a time, under Cromwell, dominated Protestantism, in spite of the efforts of English kings.

Presbyterian domination came with the *Westminster Confession of Faith* in 1647, which was drafted by the Westminster Assembly, called in 1643 by Parliament. This Assembly consisted of 150 officials of state and clergy, 121 of whom were Puritans. Their task was to settle questions of faith by agreement with the Word of God, and to recommend ways by which the Church and the state could live at peace. The Presbyterians, in the majority, triumphed. The Scots also adopted the *Westminster Confession*.

With the death of Cromwell and the Restoration of the Stuart kings in 1660, the Anglican

Church threw off Presbyterianism and returned to its Episcopalian forms. The Scottish people had to fight almost continuously to preserve so much as a crumb of their Presbyterianism. In the tradition of John Knox, the Covenanting groups — the "Scots Worthies" — resisted tyranny wherever it showed itself, and two years after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, Presbyterianism was re-established in Scotland.

During these years of religious turmoil in seventeenth-century England and Scotland, members of the Presbyterian Church had been cutting home ties and emigrating to America. First from England and Scotland, and then in a swelling tide from Ulster where the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians were strong, came the preachers and the congregations. As they stepped upon the shores of the New World they brought with them the beliefs and the church of John Knox and John Calvin.

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