

# A Misunderstood Church

A TRIBUTE TO  
THE CHURCH OF MY FATHERS

*by*

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## FOREWORD

This booklet is the substance of an address delivered by Rev. David G. Wylie, D.D., before the Presbyterian Ministers' Association of New York and Vicinity on May 5th, 1930.

The ministers present spoke in high praise of the address, thanked the speaker by a rising vote, and requested its publication in order that the address might have a wide circulation. In closing his address, Dr. Wylie said, "This is my Tribute to the Church of my Fathers."

The reading of the address will put iron into the blood of Christian people by reminding them of the price paid for their spiritual heritage.

THE Misunderstood Church, to which I refer, is the Covenanter, or Reformed Presbyterian Church, the lineal descendant of the Church of Scotland, in the days of its pristine glory. I was brought up in this historical communion, and, since my youth, have been well acquainted with its history, theology and "distinctive principles." I have, however, during the past three months, given patient study to the period of history from the reign of James VI. of Scotland and I. of England to the Revolution Settlement under William, in 1688. Mark well these dates, for they cover a time of great movements and great men.

In my boyhood days certain words, names, places and phrases were burned into my mind; words, like "malignants", "disruption", "indulgence", "oaths", "covenants", "popery", "prelacy" and "erastianism"; places, like "Ayr-ressoss", "Pentland", "Marston Moor", "Drumclog", "Bothwell Bridge", "Greyfriars Churchyard", and "Westminster Hall"; names of persons like "Calvin", "Knox", "Melville", "Richard Cameron", "Donald Cargill", and "James Renwick"; phrases like "the Covenants", "acts of Supremacy", "the Headship of Christ", "Christ's Crown and Covenant."

This paper seeks to present the historical

facts, to add or subtract nothing from the record, and to be a faithful interpreter of what the Covenanter, or Reformed Presbyterian Church, has believed, taught, and practised for the past two hundred and fifty years.

In this connection, I call attention to a remarkable fact, namely; that the doctrines in regard to the Scriptures, the Presbyterian polity, the purity of worship, the duty of Covenanting, the Headship of Christ over the Church and nations, enunciated by the Covenanter Church in the time of Charles II. have been adhered to and faithfully proclaimed by the Reformed Presbyterian Church since that time, so that what the Covenanter Church was, two and a half centuries ago, it has been throughout the whole course of its history and is today.

## I.

IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND THE ORIGIN OF THE COVENANTER, OR REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, WE MUST TAKE A DIP INTO SCOTCH HISTORY.

The Scotch reformation was a part of the movement for reform that swept over Germany, England, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, and France. John Knox, its fiery leader, followed in the footsteps of Calvin. He faced Mary, Queen of Scots, and reformed many abuses. There was much "rough work", the breaking of images and the destruction of churches and abbeys, but Knox was thinking, not so much of smashing images in churches,

as of destroying popery, prelacy, erastianism and idolatry.

These things were not done in a corner, but on a large, open, world stage, in the presence of nobles, princes and kings, Grayfriars Churchyard and Westminster Hall have been household words for a quarter of a millennium.

## II.

THE REFORMATION IN SCOTLAND WAS FOLLOWED BY A SECOND REFORMATION

The first reformation freed the Church from the domination of the papacy and the purpose of the second reformation was to liberate the church from the dominion of prelacy. Was the Church to be governed by a representative General Assembly or by bishops? Was Christ, or the civil ruler, to be king and head of the Church? The discussion of these two questions brings us to one of the most tragic eras in the ecclesiastical and civil history of Scotland. The conflict was carried on under the imperious, domineering, selfish and immoral kings of the Stuart family, James VI., Charles I., and Charles II. A few words in regard to each of them.

In the time of James V. and VI. the corruptions in the Church in Scotland were greater than in almost any other country in Europe and the principles of the reformation were pushed further than elsewhere. There was a

titanic struggle in which the Roman Catholic system was overthrown.

Under James VI. there was a contest between episcopacy and Presbyterianism, the former being supported by the sovereign and the latter by the common people and by many of the nobles. James struggled hard for absolute supremacy in both Church and State, and was, to a large extent, successful in carrying out his designs. He regarded Presbyterianism as too democratic.

Charles I. believed in "passive obedience," ruled long without a Parliament, established the "Star Chamber" and the "High Commission", was guilty of many plots and counterplots, and, finally, was tried at Westminster as "a tyrant, traitor, murderer and beheaded."

Charles II. was a wild youth whose two years in Paris were a poor preparation for the kingship. At first he was welcomed by all classes, but turned out to be guilty of intrigues and persecutions, and a faithless, selfish, imperious, and abjectly sensual king. In his harem, of a dozen or score of mistresses, was the celebrated Nell Gwynn.

No sooner, however, was Charles II. seated on the throne than he began to oppose the reformation that he had sworn to support. Having established episcopacy he resolved to suppress Presbytery and to make himself supreme in ecclesiastical and civil affairs. Thousands of faithful ministers were banished from their congregations in England and Scotland and

from twenty to thirty thousand Presbyterians suffered martyrdom. Some ministers went into the State Church, renouncing the Covenants, while those who remained faithful were driven to the moors and mountains and butchered without mercy. The reign of Charles II. was probably the worst in English history.

### III.

#### THE COVENANTS, FROM WHICH THE COVENANTER, OR REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH TAKES ITS NAME

The National Covenant is sometimes called the "Scot's Confession" to distinguish it from the more elaborate Confession of Faith placed on the statute books by Parliament. The purpose of this covenant was to counteract the attempts made by the Roman Catholic Church to gain its lost hold on Scotland. It contained a confession of adherence to the "true Christian faith and religion", a renunciation of popery, a pledge of obedience to Presbyterian discipline, allegiance to the king, and the defense of the gospel. It was a life and death struggle.

The Solemn League and Covenant was an international treaty between Scotland and England to secure civil and religious liberty. Committees from Scotland met with English commissioners and the result was a "Solemn League and Covenant" which was accepted with joyful unity both in England and Scotland, subscribed by the English Parliament

and the Westminster Assembly of Divines, and sworn to by all ranks and classes in Scotland and England. It was also sent to Ireland, where it was eagerly subscribed by the Protestants.

The object of the Solemn League and Covenant, as set forth in the preamble, was the "preservation of ourselves and our religion from utter ruin and destruction." The Covenanters pledged themselves to the preservation of the Reformed religion in England, Scotland, and Ireland, and uniformity in doctrine, worship, discipline and government. In their contest with Charles II. the motto on the flag of the Covenanters was "For Christ's Crown and Covenant". After a long and bloody struggle were successful in securing a free General Assembly, in opposition to prelacy, and Christ was recognized as the head of the Church.

The revolution that seated William and Mary on the throne made sweeping changes. Parliament decreed that the Covenants were no longer obligatory; they were declared unlawful oaths and annulled; and it was declared treason to take them.

The revolutionary settlement under William was not satisfactory to many, and the Presbyterians who adhered to the Covenants, were, on this account, called *Covenanters*. They maintained that the "covenants," notwithstanding the acts of Parliament, were binding on the nation. However, the Coven-

ants found no place in the polity of the reconstructed church and episcopacy was established in England and Ireland and Presbyterianism in Scotland. Covenanters, however, through all their history, have firmly maintained that the covenants are still binding, and at their ordination, Covenanter ministers and elders are required to assent to the following question:

"Do you believe that the national covenant of Scotland, and the Solemn League and Covenant of Scotland, England, and Ireland, were entered into agreeably to the spirit of this permanent institution, and from the unity of the Christian Church, that these engagements, divested of anything peculiar to the British Isles, are still binding upon the Reformed Church in every land?"

#### IV.

#### DISTINCTIVE PRINCIPLES

The Covenanter Church has much in common with the Church of Scotland, and with Presbyterian bodies throughout the world; the same history, theology, polity and standards,—the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Directory of Worship and Catechisms.

This Church, however, believes that every communion should publish to the world the principles that distinguish it from other branches of the Church of Christ, and has done so in its "Testimony."

We are now to consider the distinctive principles of the Covenanter Church and to interpret their meaning. *It is wise to weight well these propositions for if the premises are admitted it will be difficult to escape the conclusions.*

1. The Covenanter, or Reformed Presbyterian Church, acknowledges the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the word of God and the only rule of faith and manners.

It is true that every branch of the Presbyterian Church embodies this declaration in its confession of Faith, but the Covenanter Church lays special stress upon the authority of the Scriptures, which are the Word of God and supreme, regulating faith, doctrine, duty, and all of life. The Scriptures are an infallible law, and the court of final appeal. It is, therefore, not convenience, popularity, tradition, or Christian consciousness that is to decide any matter, but God, speaking in His word, which is above Protestant ministers, Catholic priests, papal decrees, councils, assemblies, legislatures, cabinets, sovereigns, or emperors. The scriptures, believed in and applied, elevate the Church and State to a moral grandeur. The Covenanter Church goes, for its final authority, not to Rome, or to Geneva, or to Westminster, but to the Word of God.

The Covenanter Church holding that the Word of God is the law, to be obeyed by Christians, churches and nations, let us now see how this principle is applied.

(1) First the Scriptures regulate worship. It is the position of the Covenanter Church that what is not commanded is forbidden. John Knox said "all worshipping, honoring, or service invented by the brain of man, in the worship of God without His own expressed commandment is idolatry". The Psalms are commanded and the Psalter is a sufficient book of praise. Hymns and songs of human composition are not commanded and for this reason the Covenanter Church, during its whole history, has made use of inspired psalms only, in the praise of God.

(2) In regard to musical instruments, it is held that they were used in the temple service, but not in the synagogue. Christ, His disciples, and the early Church made no use of musical instruments, and following their example, the Covenanter Church declines to use accompaniments in the praise of God. Its doctrine is that praise is spiritual and that worship does not depend upon mechanical appliances. In passing, it may be said that the Greek Church makes no use of musical instruments and is noted for its superb music. Some of the finest singing in the world may be heard in the Greek Church on the Mount of Olives by nuns and by the human voice alone.

(3) Prayer. According to the Standards, "prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God in the name of Christ". A prayer that consciously omits the name of Christ is not a Christian prayer; and associations, clubs, societies, organizations, or lodges that eliminate

the name of Christ in their prayers, and appeal to the "Great Architect of the Universe" or to some other undefined being, is guilty of travesty in prayer and of false, will-worship. For this reason the Covenanter Church prohibits its members from entering any society, organization or lodge, where negative or unchristian forms of prayers are used.

(4) The proper use of oaths is not a "distinctive principle" or "term of communion" in the Covenanter Church, but it holds a high doctrine in regard to oaths, and the administration of an oath is a serious matter. An oath is a solemn attestation in support of a declaration or promise by an appeal to God. In law, such an attestation is under the penalty of perjury. It is the doctrine of the Covenanter Church that oaths should be administered by legitimately constituted authority in Church and State and the followers of Christ should not take an oath lightly or when it is administered by one not authorized to do so.

(5) The Scriptures regulate the conduct of Christians who have been redeemed by Christ, purified by His spirit, and who, though in the world, are not to be of the world.

In daily life Christians, of course, come into contact, in social and business affairs, with men of the world, but they are not to enter into any "entangling alliances". Christ and His disciples lived in the white light of publicity and gave help and comfort to men because they were men, not because they gave winks,

or grips, or secret signs. There were secret societies in the days of the Redeemer with their so-called "mysteries", but Christ, the Apostles, and ministers of the early Church were not members of them, but shunned and condemned them.

The Covenanter Church, in loyalty to Christ, and to a life lived in the open, believes that the Church should be the great fraternity; that the oath-bound lodge, often an association of unredeemed and unchristian men, is an injury to the individual, the home, society, and the State; that the "charity" of the lodge is often a false charity; that when a pseudo-religious society competes with the Church, it is an injury to Christian character; that lodges have no authority to "transfer men from the Grand Lodge below to the Grand Lodge above"; that this is either rhetoric or doctrine, and if doctrine, conflicts with the sphere of the Church which alone has authority to deal with spiritual matters, the salvation and eternal life of men.

For these reasons, the Covenanter, or Reformed Presbyterian Church, forbids its members to become affiliated with secret, oath-bound societies.

2. The Covenanter, or Reformed Presbyterian Church, believes "that the whole doctrine of the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Catechisms, larger and shorter, are agreeable unto and founded upon the Scriptures.

This article, in general terms, is accepted by all Presbyterian Churches, but not in its entirety; for "the whole doctrine" becomes for "substance of doctrine."

This is an innocent looking phrase, but it has led to many differences and even to latitudinarianism on the part of many of the ministers and elders of our Presbyterian Churches.

3. The Covenanter, or Reformed Presbyterian Church, believes in "The divine right of one unalterable form of Church government and manner of worship."

Most Presbyterian denominations accept, in general terms, this declaration but not in the positive form by which it is held by the Covenanter Church. Note the words "divine" and "unalterable."

Why does the Covenanter Church hold that the Presbyterian System of Church Government and manner of worship is "divine" and "unalterable"? Because they believe it to be the teaching of the Scriptures. Again they go to the lawbook and find it there. They believe that the Presbyterian System is the only form prescribed in the Bible and therefore is of divine right. They decline to believe that several and distinctive forms of church government are to be found in this infallible Standard and that Christians are at liberty to select the form that best suits their taste or convenience. They believe that the Head of the Church, who is author of the Scriptures, knew and revealed the form of government that

would best promote the highest interest of the Church.

In the Statute Book of their King they found the great outstanding principle of representative government, the Presbyterian, which safeguards the rights both of ministers and people. They did not find warrant for independency or episcopacy which to them are unscriptural and unwarranted forms of church government.

4. The Covenanter Church believes that public covenanting is an ordinance of God to be observed by churches and nations and that the National Covenant of Scotland, and the Solemn League and Covenant, so far as applicable to the United States, is of binding obligation upon the Church.

In their study of Scripture, they find many examples of covenanting, and in 1871 at Pittsburgh the Reformed Presbyterian Church entered into a Covenant which was sworn to and subscribed by the ministers, elders, deacons and members of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America. Their statement is impressive,—“We, with our hands lifted up, do jointly and severally swear by the great and dreadful name of the Lord our God.” Space will not permit even a brief statement of the various articles contained in this solemn declaration.

5. The Headship of Christ over His Church is a distinctive principle of the Covenanter Church.

By this principle the independence of the Church and its nonsubordination to the State is assured.

This means that the doctrine, government, discipline, and worship of the Church can be set up and administered only in accordance with the mind and will of Christ and there is no room for expediency or compromise.

The doctrine is now well recognized and an excellent book on the subject is "The Headship of Christ" by Hugh Miller.

To-day, in all countries where the Church and State are independent, there is little interference on the part of the State in the affairs of the Church. Even in countries like England, where there is a "religious establishment," a feeling is growing up that the Church should be independent of the State. Queen Victoria looked upon herself as head of the Church, but in one of his letters, Mr. Gladstone said that the Queen needed more education in regard to this question.

Everyone familiar with the conditions of things in England today knows that the Church is restless under the domination of the State and even disestablishment is being discussed. It seems abnormal that the House of Commons made up of Baptists, Congregationalists, Independents, Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, and men of no faith, should settle the doctrine of the established church and decide upon what should appear in its Prayer Book.

This was a practical doctrine at the time of the reformation. The Covenanters believed that Jesus Christ had been formally invested with the control of His Church and that this royal prerogative, which belongs exclusively to the Messiah, should not be usurped. They believed that it was blasphemy on the part of priest, presbyter, premier, potentate, or any other person in power to exercise this prerogative. The church possesses an independent jurisdiction under her King and Lawgiver and in the exercise of his jurisdiction was required and entitled to be free. This being the doctrine of the Covenanters, it is not surprising that they resisted, unto death, all encroachments, either by ecclesiastics or by the king himself.

6. The Kingship of Christ over the nations is perhaps *the* distinguishing doctrine of the Covenanter or Reformed Presbyterian Church.

According to Covenanters, civil government is a divine institution, God is the source of all authority in Church and State, and Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords. This being the case, the State, in its fundamental instrument, the Constitution, is under obligation to recognize God as the source of its authority and conform its legislation to the divine law.

Because the United States refuses to acknowledge God as the source of all authority, or to submit to Jesus Christ as King, the Covenanter Church takes the position of "political dissent" from the constitution until it recognizes the authority of Jesus Christ.

To Covenanters, throughout the whole course of their history, this great doctrine, "The Headship of Christ over the State and Nations" was not a mere empty sound, but, on the other hand, they drew from this doctrine the inference that "Kings and Nations in their official and national character should recognize by formal declarations the Great Sovereign, Jesus Christ; and that they should form their constitutions and enact their laws in obedience to that Sovereign, taking His word as the great statute book."

## V.

### WHY THE COVENANTER OR REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH HAS BEEN MISUNDERSTOOD

1. Because many Christian people are not familiar with its history and doctrinal position.
2. To many the story of the Reformation in Scotland is a closed book. They do not know that "upon the anvil of the Covenanters" the "hammer of royal tyranny was made to fall"; and it is a fact that not many of the names of those who made history in those dark days were on the scroll of fame.

*"They lived unknown  
Till persecution dragged them into fame,  
And chased them up to heaven."*

3. Truth is many sided and Christians interpret Scriptural statements in different ways. The Covenanter Church takes the position

that while it is under obligation to interpret the Holy Scripture according to its best judgment, other Christians have the right to put their interpretations upon the Scriptures. They hold that God alone is Lord of the conscience.

4. The Covenanter Church is misunderstood because many suppose that on account of its position in regard to the Headship of Christ over the Church and State, a union of Church and State is sought.

Such is not the case, for the Reformed Presbyterian Church has maintained for 250 years that civil government, properly constituted, is an ordinance of God to which Christians owe allegiance. In its political philosophy the Covenanter Church has maintained through the whole course of its history that both Church and State are divine and separate institutions and under obligation to assist each other. The doctrine that God is to be acknowledged as the source of authority in the Constitution of the United States is not intended by the Reformed Presbyterian Church to lead to a union of Church and State.

5. The Covenanter Church is misunderstood in regard to its position respecting the use of psalms, the non-use of instruments in worship, secret societies, and its strict interpretations of the Holy Scriptures. For this reason, many suppose the Reformed Presbyterian Church to be narrow, irrational, and unsocial. However, all who are well acquainted with

members of the Reformed Presbyterian Church must admit that they are fair minded, open minded, fraternal and social. They love art, music, architecture and believe that life should be made pleasant and happy.

I am loath to close, but do so with a few statements.

1. The position of the Covenanter Church is to be explained only by the fact that its members are loyal to their conscience and convictions.

2. The Covenanter Church today, and throughout all its history, has exercised an influence out of all proportion to its numbers and resources; and this largely because of the clear, strong and positive position which the church takes on doctrinal matters and its practice of political dissent from immoral constitutions and governments.

3. Reading the history of Great Britain and the United States one finds that many distinguished men like Boswell, Robert Louis Stevenson, Thomas Carlyle and Woodrow Wilson have prided themselves in having Covenanter blood in their veins. This is not strange, for Covenanter blood has produced a race of pious, conscientious fearless, patriotic, God fearing, Christ-like men.

4. The Christian Church is indebted to the Reformed Presbyterian Church for its advocacy of the "crowned rights" of Jesus Christ. The State also owes much to Covenanters for

their leadership in civil affairs; for it should not be forgotten that Richard Cameron and a small band of armed men appeared in the streets of Sanquhar in 1660, and nailed this declaration to the cross—

"We do by these presents, disown Charles Stewart, that has been reigning, or rather tyrannizing, on the throne of Britain these three years bygone, as having any right, title to, or interest in the Crown of Scotland for Government . . . We do declare war with such a tyrant and usurper and all the men of his practices."

It is significant that only eight years afterward the principles of this declaration were embraced by the nation at large and the house of Stuart was driven from the throne.

The fact should be emphasized that the Sanquhar Declaration was issued a century before another band of patriots nailed up their declaration at Mecklinburg, North Carolina, a year before the Declaration of Independence was given to the world from old Independence Hall, Philadelphia.

The Covenanter Church believed that resistance to tyrants was lawful and they were commanding leaders in civil affairs. They believed not only in religious, but in civil liberty.

5. No thoughtful man can read the history of the Covenanter Church for the past Two Hundred and Fifty years without a feeling of gratitude, and thanksgiving for the heroism of

those who stood up in the face of great opposition for what they believed to be right. The conduct of the Covenanters can be explained only on the principle that they love both church and state ardently. "Theirs was a love which cruel mockings could not damp; a love which the boot that made the white marrow swim in purple gore could not abate; a love which the swelling waters could not drown; a love which the scaffold could not expel; a love which, by the faggots and the fire, was fanned into a brighter flame. For, many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it."

6. The principle doctrine of the Covenanter Church, the Headship of Christ over nations, should be emphasized at the present time. We hear a great deal today about the supremacy of Christ in all the affairs of life, but often the ideas are undefined. Covenanters believe that Jesus Christ should be enthroned in the state, in law, in music, in art, in commerce, in government, and in all the affairs of life. They plead and long for the real supremacy of Christ and not a shadowy one.

May the day soon dawn and the clock strike the hour when Christ shall be King; when he shall "take the throne of every heart, and the throne of every household, and the throne of every community, and the throne of every church, and the throne of every nation, and the throne of all the worlds." When that day comes, as it will come, a redeemed world will

unite in the glorious anthem "And He shall reign, King of kings, and Lord of lords, forever, and ever and ever, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah."

This is my tribute to the Church of my fathers.