

# Why I am a Covenanter.

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ORDAINED AND INSTALLED  
PASTOR OF CLARKSBURG  
NOVEMBER 18, 1868.  
RESIGNED - APRIL 11, 1884  
FALL OF 1884, PRESIDENT  
OF THE POLYTECHNIC  
INSTITUTE, ALLEGHENY  
CITY, PA. FOR 3 YRS.

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INSTALLED - FEBRUARY 9, 1886  
RELEASED - JULY 1, 1907  
DIED - JANUARY 21, 1914  
AGE - 76 YEARS.

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Published by the  
R. P. Congregation of New Alexandria, Pa.  
...1901...

A Sermon preached on Monday, May 20, 1901,  
at the close of Communion Season in the New  
Alexandria Congregation, and given for publication  
at their unanimous request.

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1 Peter 3:15—"Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear."

This exhortation was addressed to converts to the Christian faith scattered through different provinces of Asia Minor. Few in number and surrounded by the devotees of idol worship, their religion was often assailed, and made the butt of jests and sneers. Christ crucified, while a stumbling block to the Jews, was foolishness to the Greeks. To them it appeared supremely ridiculous to preach that a man who could not save himself from death, and that, too, the death of a malefactor, was able to save his fellow men from all the woes of soul and body, under which they labored, and even to raise them from the dust and rottenness of the grave, and take them to dwell with himself in immortal glory and bliss. Christians, therefore, were often asked, How can a dead man save you? How can his shade in the nether world hear your prayers, and deliver you from your troubles and sorrows? Why do you hold such absurd notions? These questions were sometimes asked in sincerity, but as often in a contemptuous tone. Yet nevertheless Peter says, "Be ready," that is be able, "always to give an answer to every man that asketh you of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear."

We should entertain no opinions for which we are not able to give good reasons; and when the grounds of our belief are demanded from us, we should be ready to state these grounds intelligently and with some degree of effectiveness. The demand may sometimes be made with a taunt or a sneer,

but it is better to meet it with a kind and strong argument, than to become angry, and turn away with contempt. For here our speech is to be "with meekness and fear;" "with due regard towards man, and reverence towards God, remembering His cause does not need man's temper to uphold it." It is with feelings such as these that we this morning would strive to answer the question with which we are sometimes met. Why do you belong to the Reformed Presbyterian or Covenanter church? We reply.

1. Because of the grandeur of her past history. She holds a unique and prominent place in the history of Protestant Christianity. Her principles, her struggles, and her sufferings for Christ's crown and covenant command our admiration and inflame our zeal. In doctrine, simplicity of worship and fervor of devotion we have no hesitation in claiming for her identity with the primitive church of the apostolic age. But as a distinct denomination she took her rise in Scotland in the great Reformation of the 16th century. The first, so far as is known, who denounced the corruptions of the Papacy, and preached a pure gospel to his countrymen, was Patrick Hamilton, a young man of royal lineage, great talents, and burning zeal. Attracted by the fame of Luther and Melancthon, he repaired to Wittenberg in 1526, that he might enjoy the benefit of their instructions. After a short stay on the Continent he returned to his native land, and resumed his preaching. But his career was speedily brought to an end. He was arrested and burned at the stake early in 1528, when he was yet in the twenty-fourth year of his age. His cruel death, and the Christian heroism with which he endured it, drew attention to the doctrines for which he suffered, and led to such inquiries as in many cases resulted in conviction of the truth. Notwithstanding the bitter persecution which was waged against all who dared to embrace them, they spread with such rapidity that in less than twenty years from the martyrdom of the youthful Reformer, the Protestant party had become strong enough to rise in armed opposition to their persecutors.

In 1560 the government was forced to concede them the right to hold a free parliament. This body met on the first day of August of the same year. Early in its sessions, it abolished the Roman Catholic church as the church of Scotland, prohibited the celebration of mass under certain penalties, and required the Protestant ministers to draw up a summary of scriptural doctrines to take the place of the discarded corruptions of Rome. The ministers with John Knox as the leading spirit, speedily prepared a confession of faith. This was at once reported to the parliament, and after careful discussion, adopted as the creed of the national church. To perfect the new organization and devise means for promoting its interests, a number of ministers and laymen met near the close of the same year, 1560, constituting what has been regarded as the first General Assembly of the Scottish church. A book of church order was prepared, defining the government of the church and laying down rules for the exercise of church discipline. This book is known in history by the name of the First Book of Discipline, as it afterwards gave way to another, in which its principles were more fully developed and applied to the state of things existing at the time. The system of doctrine and church polity thus established remained unchanged until 1647, when the Westminster Confession of Faith, embodying the same truths was adopted, and henceforth became the accepted standard of the church.

But our Scottish fathers in their efforts to secure gospel purity in faith and practice did not escape persecution. To aid them in their struggles and sufferings, they once and again entered into sworn covenant engagements, in which they pledged their fortunes and their lives in defense of the truth. Their principles were peculiarly obnoxious to the reigning sovereign, who sought to subject their ecclesiastical courts to his control by forcing bishops on their church. His motto was, "No bishop no king." To effect his purpose he did not hesitate to resort to treachery and persecution, banishing some of the most eminent ministers from the

kingdom. When under the title of James I. he succeeded to the throne of England in 1603, he made no change in his ecclesiastical policy, except to become more uncompromisingly severe. On his death his son, Charles I., fell heir to his principles as well as to his throne, and adopted more high handed measures to force Episcopacy on his Scottish subjects. In England the people rose in arms against him, and his tyrannical measures cost him his life as well as his crown. The restoration of his profligate son, after the death of Cromwell and the overthrow of the Commonwealth, brought no relief to the Scottish people who were struggling to maintain the principles of their religion in the face of unwearied opposition. On the contrary, they were made to feel the utmost severity of the royal displeasure. For twenty-eight years both Charles II. and James, his brother and successor on the throne, left no means untried that craft could suggest or power employ to overthrow the Scottish church, and root out every vestige of Presbyterianism from the realm. Under such circumstances it is not surprising that many of the ministry and the people yielded to the usurpations of the perfidious king, and acknowledged him as their lawful sovereign, though he had flagrantly broken his coronation oath, and ordered the covenants which he had sworn to defend to be burnt in public by the hands of the common hangman. But our covenanted ecclesiastical ancestors disowned his authority, and stood forth as bold, uncompromising defenders of civil and religious liberty. History contains no more thrilling chapter than that which records their heroic sufferings. They were driven from their homes, and compelled to seek safety from their persecutors in the wild glens and caves of their native mountains. They were despoiled of their goods, imprisoned, tortured, banished from their country, or sold as slaves to go abroad. Their blood was poured out like water. Claverhouse and his dragoons, like ravenous wolves in hot pursuit of their prey, chased them over mountain and moor. Twenty thousand suffered martyrdom for the truth. Neither age nor

sex was spared. Men, women and children were shot, were thrust through with the sword, were hanged, were beheaded, were drowned. But all attempts to crush them and the cause for which they battled so nobly, ended in signal defeat. As well was it for the world, that their weary years of suffering and sorrow and loss proved no vain sacrifice. For as one has truly said, "Had the stern old Covenanters once yielded, the cause of civil and religious freedom would have met a reverse from which it might never have recovered. But they kept the faith, and success came. Through their initiative the Revolution of '88 was made an accomplished fact. Through their invincible courage and unyielding constancy they won for themselves freedom of conscience and worship, and prepared the way for the general diffusion of civil liberty throughout the English speaking world."

To this source historic verity requires us to attribute a large share of the predominating influence that brought about the founding of our great American Republic with its free institutions. The Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, the descendants of the old Covenanters who had been banished for their religion, or voluntarily fled to the then wilds of this western world, where they might enjoy its exercise undisturbed, were "to a man the early and steadfast friends and champions of American rights, and the first to declare for complete independence." In a carefully prepared paper read before the General Assembly of the Southern Presbyterian church, on the occasion of its memorial services in commemoration of the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the formation of the Westminster standards, the writer makes these statements, and in their support gives us the following historical facts: "The Scotch-Irish settlers upon the Watauga and the Holston Assembly at Abingdon in January, 1775, resolved that 'we are resolutely and unalterably determined never to surrender our inestimable privileges to any power on earth but at the expense of our lives.'" The Scotch-Irish Presbyterians of

Western Pennsylvanian, assembled at Hanna's Town in May, 1776, resolved to oppose by force of arms the aggressions of the British Parliament, and to coincide in any scheme that might be formed for the defense of America.

The Scotch-Irish Presbyterians of the good county of Mecklenburg, in the brave state of North Carolina, assembled in May, 1775, in the then hamlet, but now beautiful and historic city of Charlotte, and adopted a Declaration of Independence and a well digested scheme of government; and they did this more than a year before Washington and Jefferson had ceased to hope for a reconciliation with the mother country, or the Continental Congress sufficiently mastered its fears to renounce its allegiance to the British crown. Baneroft is fully warranted in declaring that "the first voice publicly raised in America for severing all connection with Great Britain came not from the Puritans of New England, nor the Dutch of New York, nor the planters of Virginia, but from the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians." Is it not an honor and a privilege worthy of the highest appreciation to hold membership in a church whose past record is so illustrious?

II. Because of the position which this church has always occupied on moral reforms. Take the question of slavery, a burning question a generation ago, when four millions of human beings were held in involuntary bondage for no other reason than that their skin was black, and they were helpless and ignorant. They were bought and sold and treated like cattle, and often with far greater inhumanity. Cruel drivers often plied the lash mercilessly upon the naked bodies of men and women. Children were torn from their parents, husbands were ruthlessly parted from their wives. The cries and groans of the oppressed rose to heaven, but there were few to lift a voice to plead their cause or to protest against their wrongs. The Reformed Presbyterian church at an early period in her history not only denounced this iniquity, but was the first church in the land to take the position that the holding of human beings as slaves is inherently sinful, and to exclude slavehold-

ers from her communion. The great mass of professing Christians, all the large and more influential denominations were indifferent to the claims of the slave on their sympathy and compassion, and ready to join hands with his impious oppressor. So soon as the system began to be denounced as a crime against God and man, and the duty of emancipation to be urged, they hastened to declare that the holding of slaves was with them no bar to ecclesiastical communion. In the General Assembly of the Presbyterian church all discussion of the subject was stifled as too agitating, and as endangering the peace and prosperity of the church. The same policy was followed by Baptists, Methodists, Congregationalists, Episcopalians. All were careful that nothing should be said or done in their church courts that would call in question the right of their brethren in the South to hold their fellow men of African descent in bondage. Even the old Seceder church had slaveholders in her communion as late as 1829 and the Associate Reformed church was in the like condition until the union was formed in 1855 that brought into existence the United Presbyterian church, which took its stand on the side of freedom and plead the cause of the enslaved. Of course, in the different bodies of professing Christians there were earnest, conscientious men who felt and recognized the claims of humanity, but the great bulk of the membership, like the rest of the community, were insensible to the wrong that was being done in the land and had no word of sympathy for the poor and needy that were being robbed of their all. The nation, the people, the churches, all were on the side of the oppressor. For more than a quarter of a century the Reformed Presbyterian church stood alone in battling for the rights of the slave.

When the abolition movement began in 1831, and its lecturers traveled over the country, proclaiming anti-slavery doctrines, they were looked on as fanatics, disturbers of the peace, inciters to riot and bloodshed, and their meetings broken up by howling mobs. Halls, school houses, churches, and even Quaker meeting houses were closed against them. In

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1834, no church but one in Philadelphia—the Reformed Presbyterian church on Cherry street—could be found willing to open its doors for an anti-slavery lecture. Amid all the reproach, calumny, abuse and violence to which the early friends of the slave were exposed, we as a church spoke out plainly on the subject. No runaway slave ever appealed in vain to a Covenanter for help. At personal inconvenience and often at the imminent risk of loss, he was concealed from his pursuers and conducted forward on his way to freedom. And when in madness war was waged to perpetuate the accursed system of bondage, Covenanter young men were among the first to shoulder their guns and march to the defense of their imperiled country.

Take another unpopular reform, the cause of anti-secrecy. Here the opposition of the Reformed Presbyterian church has from the first been constant and unchanging. The secrecy of the lodge, unlike the privacy that is conceded to the individual and the family, she considers as contrary to the teachings and example of the Master, who declares, "I ever spoke openly in the synagogues, and in secret have I said nothing." And who enjoins openness and publicity on his disciples, when he tells them to "let their light shine before men," and commends those who "come to the light that their deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God." The oaths by which the lodge binds its members, she regards as unwarranted, dangerous and ensnaring to the conscience and a profanation of that sacred ordinance which God has instituted for safeguarding the interest of society. As for the principle of charity to which the lodge is accustomed to lay claim, she is compelled to call it an empty boast, since the very class that most needs charity—the poor, the aged, the blind, the lame—are excluded, while the larger portion of the dues collected from the members are paid out, not in charity, but in lodge expenses. No less does she object to the religion which the various secret orders profess to teach, inasmuch as it ignores Christ the only name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved; while in faithfulness to her divine

Head and Lord, she is constrained to condemn the morality of which they boast, as selfish and partial; the friendship, love and benevolence enjoined by them, including, not all men, but their fellow members only.

Turn now to the temperance question. Here the Reformed Presbyterian church holds a leading position. In the pulpit, through the press, and by the deliverances of her courts, she has waged an uncompromising warfare against the unholy traffic in strong drink. The maker, the seller, the user of intoxicants, the man who puts his name on the saloonkeeper's bond, or rents his property for conducting the unrighteous business, are excluded from her membership. All forms of license by the state or by the nation meet with her condemnation as a participation in the crime, and all fermented wines for sacramental purpose she has placed under her ban. On the whole subject of temperance she today occupies the highest ground of any church in the land. And so as regards other reforms and efforts to lift men to a higher plane of living, she stands in the front rank and is ever ready to do her part, courting the approbation of Him only who sits as King on Zion's holy hill. This is the only true position for a church of Christ to assume, and constitutes a valid reason for our enrollment in its membership and our identification with it in its efforts to overthrow evil and enthrone righteousness in the earth.

III. A third reason for being a Reformed Presbyterian is the freedom of her pulpit. Here no subject relating to sin or duty is excluded from discussion. By sworn covenant engagement her officers and members have "pledged themselves to pray and labor according to their power, that whatever is contrary to godliness may be removed and the church beautified with universal conformity to the law and will of her divine Head and Lord." There are many still in the flesh who can remember when the discussion of national sins and duties was seldom heard in any other pulpits than in those of the Reformed Presbyterian church. On sacramental occasions, especially in the sermon on Mon-

day it was the invariable practice of the old fathers in the ministry to preach on some aspect of the nation's disregard of God's law and the claims of his Son as its rightful Lord and King; and to urge repentance as the only means of averting the judgments which persistence in sin brings on the guilty nation as well as on the guilty individual. In doing this those old fathers were looked on as enemies of their country and often excited no small degree of odium. The accepted dictum in those days was, "Let a minister preach the gospel; religion has nothing to do with politics." This dictum has indeed been largely banished into desuetude, and for its banishment some measure of credit is, under God, certainly due to the steady persistent opposition of our church to every attempt to place her ministry under any such restrictions in delivering the message of Christ.

But while political questions in their moral bearings are now regarded as proper subjects for pulpit discussion, it is still true that there is no other pulpit in the land where a minister of Christ is so free and untrammelled in denouncing the prevailing evils of the day as is the pulpit of the Reformed Presbyterian church. There are pulpits not a few where even the subject of temperance, not to mention other questions that fall within the realm of morals, cannot be faithfully discussed without exciting a storm of indignation on the part of members. It is a true description of the state of affairs in more churches than one in our country that Mr. Sheldon presents in his book, "The Crucifixion of Philip Strong." Mr. Strong becomes the pastor of a church in a flourishing town, which was cursed, as so many of our towns are, with the liquor traffic. He soon discovers that the property in the town which was being used for saloons, gambling houses and dens of wickedness was owned in large part by several of the most prominent members of his own church. The minister is filled with shame and indignation and calls on one of them to have a talk on the subject. The man becomes angry, but cools off somewhat as the minister points out the wrong and exhorts him to have done with it at once. The property owner looked aghast and exclaimed,

"Why, Mr. Strong, do you know what you ask? Two-thirds of the most regular part of my income is derived from these rents. It is out of the question. You are too nice in the matter. All the property owners in this town do the same thing. There isn't a man of any means in our church who isn't deriving some revenue from this source. Why, a large part of your salary is paid from these rents. You will get yourself into trouble if you try to meddle with this matter." Well, Mr. Strong was a conscientious man and did get into trouble, and a great deal of it, when he attempted to preach the truth on the subject. Now I rejoice that I belong to a church where as a minister of Christ I can proclaim the truth on this and every other subject however disagreeable to the popular taste, without arousing a spirit of bitterness and hostility, of strife and division.

IV. Because of her steadfast loyalty to the kingship of our Lord Jesus Christ. Universal supremacy belongs to him as the mediator between God and man, who has been appointed and undertaken to gather a redeemed people to himself out of every nation, kindred and tongue. He has been highly exalted, above all principality and power, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but in that which is to come; and God has given him to be head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all. For this great truth of Christ's universal dominion—his authority in all human affairs, in every department and corner of human life, the Reformed Presbyterian church has faithfully contended throughout the whole period of her history. "For Christ's Crown and Covenant" was the motto inscribed on her banner, and the battle-cry of her faithful sons and daughters in resisting the encroachments of conscienceless royalty on their God-given rights in church and state. It was because they had, as they themselves declared, "The glory of God before their eyes, and the advancement of the Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ," that in the old Gray-friars church-yard "they dipped their pens in the blood gushing warm from their hearts to sef-

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made openings in their veins," and signed their names to a solemn compact to stand together in defense of the faith once delivered to the saints, even at the sacrifice of their goods and of life itself. With her history spread out before him, who, then, would dare to call in question the loyalty of the old Covenanted Church of Scotland to her exalted Head and King?

Adopting this controlling principle as the governing principle of our lives, we in this country have felt constrained from the first to take the position of dissenters with reference to the government of our nation. So soon as the Reformed Presbyterian church was organized in this land, she applied the infallible test of Scripture teaching to the national constitution, and found that it ignored the very existence of God and Christ and his law, gave legal sanction to slavery, and made no provision for an appeal to any higher standard of right and wrong than the fickle will of the people. On account of these crimes against God and man our fathers felt they could not conscientiously give such a compact their approval or support. They therefore refused to swear the oath of allegiance, to hold any office that required an oath of allegiance, or to vote for such officers. All these acts they regarded as bringing them into complicity with the government, involving them in its sins and exposing them to its plagues. The sin of slavery has indeed been removed, but Jesus is still robbed of his royal prerogatives, and we therefore still follow the example of our fathers. We cannot in loyalty to our Savior King consent to his dethronement in the very instrument by which the nation governs itself. We cannot assume a position ourselves, or by our votes place others in a position where they may be required to administer unscriptural divorce laws, put the legal stamp of official sanction on a license to a saloon-keeper to traffic in rum, or in any way become participants in handling the mail on the Lord's day. The position we occupy may be deemed extreme and impracticable, but so was our position on the ques-

tion of human slavery, yet God in his providence vindicated it by the overthrow of the iniquitous system at a fearful cost of blood and treasure; and today as we look back over the past we have no reason to be ashamed of our record on the subject; rather, we thank God, who by His Spirit inspired our church to espouse the cause of the oppressed, and by his grace supported her in battling for their rights against such overwhelming odds. Let it not be forgotten that every moral victory that has ever been won by the friends of God has been achieved in the face of outnumbering foes. It is not large associations of men, alliances and confederations of powerful nations and kingdoms that have done great things for the world, worthy of being held in perpetual remembrance, but a few earnest, devoted souls, who cared only for the truth and the right. In moral questions the balance of power does not depend on numbers, but on the spiritual discovery of the side on which God is. As the old German reformers were accustomed to say: "One with God on his side is a majority." In due time numbers will swell around such an one, and the work for which he long labored alone will be crowned with success. Such has been God's method of procedure in the whole history of the past, and we may well take courage from it in witnessing for the royal prerogatives of our enthroned mediator. That Jesus Christ is the King of nations, and that his revealed will is the only safe standard of national legislation are undeniable truths, and in the end they must and will be triumphant. Even now there are not wanting indications of their success. The moral questions that are continually coming to the front—such as temperance, divorce, the conflict of capital and labor—and that admit of no final settlement that is not based on the morality of the divine word—the felt need for the purification of municipal politics from the fearful corruption into which they have fallen; the general acceptance of national reform principles, which once had but few friends beyond the pale of our own church. All these are signs of coming morning, after the long and weary night of darkness, preludes of that mighty shout from unnumbered multitudes, which broke on the enraptured ears of John, when, a lonely prisoner on the isle of Patmos, he was gazing far into the distant future, and which shall one day resound over a world rescued from wrong, and in subjection to Christ. "Alleluia; for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth."