

Knox and Church Order

One of the primary documents of the Scottish Reformation is The First Book of Discipline. It is a document for the ordering of the life of the Reformed Church in Scotland drawn up at the dawn of the reformation in Scotland. This document, together with The Book of Common Order, formed the original Church Order of the Reformed Church of Scotland in the days of John Knox. The First Book of Discipline was the work of five other Scots' reformers in addition to John Knox. Knox also with the help of others in Frankfurt compiled The Book of Common Order. These documents and the times in which they were written also show us the close connection especially between the Reformed Church of Scotland and that of France and Geneva. This is seen in the close contact and communication between those Churches on the matter not only on the ordering of the Church, but also all matters of doctrine, worship and government.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE FIRST BOOK OF DISCIPLINE

The years 1559 and 1560 were dramatic and crucial years of God's mighty work of reformation in Scotland. A great struggle, a spiritual struggle, but with political manifestations, was taking place in this northern land of Europe. A French noblewoman Mary, of the powerful house of Guise, was the regent queen of Scotland and had been since 1554. At this time the ducal house of Guise dominated both the French and Scottish courts.

Mary of Guise had previously been married in France. When widowed she was married to James V of Scotland who died in 1541. She had lost her two sons by James V as infants. James and Mary's only surviving child Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, was still in her minority. This young woman and heir to the Scottish throne was living in France and married to the Dauphin (crown prince) Francis. They were seen as the Queen and King of Scotland, but until Mary came of age a regent reigned in her stead.

There had been strong ties between Scotland and France, not only culturally, but also economically and militarily. They were united against a common enemy, England. For a time Mary of Guise as regent of Scotland practised a limited toleration towards those of the reformed faith in Scotland. This was only as a political tool though to woo them and to hamper English influence in Scotland, for Mary Tudor (Bloody Mary) was the tragic but bigoted Roman Catholic queen of England at the time.

Under the influence of powerful spiritual forces, Lowland Scottish society was in a state of flux. The amazing work of the Spirit of God and the force of Biblical truth had been, since the 1520's, effecting a change in the hearts and understanding of many of the dominant Lowland Scots' society. (The reformation came more slowly and later to the Highlanders where many remained under the sway of a sad mixture of pagan and Romanish beliefs and practices until the 1700's.)

Under the blessing of God, and through the means of the preaching and teaching of godly men the Reformation, this mighty work of God, was dawning in Scotland! The more outstanding preachers and leaders of this reformation were such ministers as John Knox, John Winram, John Spottiswoode, John Willock, John Douglas, John Row and Christopher Goodman and such elders as the scholar George Buchanan and the Earl of Glencairn. By 1558 the reformation had become so extensive and deep that the regent dowager queen Mary, in a negative spiritual and political reaction to it, abandoned her conciliatory policies towards the Reformed. It was now no longer necessary for her to show a conciliatory attitude to them to keep a wedge between Scotland and England for now a different queen, Elizabeth Tudor, a Protestant, had become ruler of England.

With an increasing number of Scots embracing the reformed faith, and now a majority of the ruling nobles sympathetic to the reformed faith as well as to a Protestant England, Mary of Guise's power began to seep away. So much so that in October 1559 Mary was deposed from the regency. She clung to power for a time with the help of French troops, but an English army marched to the aid of the Reformed. Mary's policy of maintaining Roman Catholicism with French arms collapsed, and for the first time the reformed of the land, in God's providence, had the dominant voice in the church and nation.

It was against this background that the First Book of Discipline, the original book of Church Order, was drawn up for the Reformed Church of Scotland.

THE FIRST BOOK OF DISCIPLINE

In July of 1560 the Parliament was called to meet in Scotland. The king and queen in France, the young Mary Queen of Scots and her husband the Dauphin commissioned it, and it met the following month.

This reforming Parliament requested the Reformed Church to draw up a Confession of Faith, known variously as the First Scots' Confession, Knox's Confession or The Scotch Confession of 1560. In addition it was requested to also draw up a Church Order showing how the Church should be governed, and how discipline should be exercised. Calderwood records, "consultation was had how a good and godlie policie might be established in the church, which, by the Papists, was altogether defaced. Commission and charge were given to draw a plat forme of the church policie, as they had done of the doctrine." (Calderwood, D. History of the Kirk of Scotland, Vol. II, page 41)

The first meeting of the General Assembly of the Reformed Church of Scotland was held in December of 1560. There were only forty delegates, of whom six were ministers. The ministers, Hetherington says, though small in number, were of "great abilities, of deep piety, and of eminent personal worth, fitted and qualified by their Creator for the work which He had given to them to do. It was very clearly seen by the reformers, that the power of discipline was essential to the well being of a Church, since without it purity could not be maintained, whether among the people or the ministers themselves. They determined, therefore, to draw up a book in which there should be a complete system of ecclesiastical government. They applied themselves to their task, looking to Divine direction and authority alone. Having arranged the subject under different heads, they divided these among them; and, after they had finished their several parts, they met together and examined them with great attention, spending much time in reading and meditation on the subject, and in earnest prayers for Divine direction." (Hetherington, W., History of the Church of Scotland, page 29.)

The men given this task, were the same six ministers who drew up the Confession of Faith. They were, John Knox, John Winram, John Spottiswoode, John Willock, John Douglas, and John Row. It tickled the Scots' sense of humour that they all had "John" as their Christian names, and were popularly called the "six Johns".

The document these worthies drew up was called The First Book of Discipline or The Policy and Discipline of the Church. After consultation with other Reformed brethren and the Scots' Parliament, further changes were made to the initial production. In its final form there were sixteen chapters. The historian A. M. Renwick says of it, "It is a remarkable document revealing better than anything else the statesmanlike qualities of the leading ministers, and their amazing far-sightedness." (Story of the Scottish Reformation, page 109)

It was sent to Calvin, Viret and Beza in Geneva, and to Peter Martyr, Bullinger and others in Zurich for their considered opinions.

The Book was ready for the scrutiny of the General Assembly by December 1560, and was presented for approval to a convention of nobles and the Privy Council. Sadly, it was never approved officially by the Scots' Parliament, as was the First Scottish Confession, for several reasons. One reason was that many of the lords had taken possession of vast territories belonging to the Church. The First Book of Discipline required that the income from these lands support not only ministers of the gospel, but also the Christian education of the youth of the nation and the care of the poor. The greed of such men over rode their nominal commitment to the cause of Christ. Many of the lords and burgesses however signed it in a private capacity and promised to forward its aims by every means in their power. Calderwood says, "Some approved it, and wished it to be ratified by law: other perceiving their carnall libertie to be restrained, and worldlie committie to be somewhat impaired thereby, grudged, in so much that the name of the Booke of Discipline became odious unto them. Yitt a great part of the nobilitie subscribed the Booke of Discipline." (op cit)

Another reason the ungodly were adverse to it was the strict discipline which it appointed to be exercised against vice. To approve it would mean that they were condemned by it. They loved darkness rather than the light of Christ and His good ways.

Though not approved formally by Parliament, The First Book of Discipline nevertheless was adopted by the Reformed Church of Scotland as its programme for ordering itself as near as it could after the principles of Christ as its Head and as taught in the Word. In the preface the authors claimed Scriptural authority for their proposals, and urged the lords of the Parliament to have a care not to sanction anything "which God's plain Word shall not approve"

THE BOOK OF COMMON ORDER

The Book of Common Order, produced in 1564, was a summary of the laws of the Church of Scotland with regard to worship. It was eventually replaced by the Westminster Standard's Directory of Public Worship. It provided a common order for worship rather than a liturgy. Its origins were in Frankfurt in 1554. Knox at that time was a refugee there from persecution in Scotland and was a pastor to a group of English Protestants who had fled from the persecution of Queen Mary Tudor (Bloody Mary). He and several other pastors were asked by the magistrates of Frankfurt and the English congregation to draw up an order in the English language that closely followed the French Reformed order of worship. Many of this congregation moved to Geneva, and this order was published there, and was also known as The Genevan Order.

After Knox's return to Scotland in 1559, this Order or Directory for worship was used by some of the Reformed congregations. The First Book of Discipline refers to it as, "the book of our common order." The General Assembly of the Reformed Church of Scotland enjoined its uniform use in "the administration of the sacraments and the solemnisation of marriages and burial of the dead".

The inclusion of a complete metrical Psalter and additional specimens of prayers drawn from both the continental and Scottish sources enlarged the Book of Common Order. This work has often been called erroneously

Knox's Liturgy. It was intended as a guide and as an aid to ministers in conducting services. It was not meant to be slavishly followed. Calderwood and others of that age made it clear it was intended to be a directory, and not ritualist liturgy.

The Book of Common Order in addition to guidelines on the administration of the sacraments, marriage and Christian burial also provided directions for fasting, the election of ministers, elders, the exercise of Church Discipline and the visitation of the sick.

The order of worship was much the same as followed by the French Reformed Church. Worship began with the simple call, "Let us worship God", and perhaps the reading of a suitable verse of Scripture. There was then a prayer of confession, followed by the singing of a psalm. Prayer for God's blessing on the preaching of the word was then offered up followed by the sermon. After the sermon a general prayer was offered, and "the Belief" or Apostle's Creed was recited. The singing of another psalm and the minister pronouncing the benediction then concluded the service. It will be noted there is no mention in this order of worship for the reading of the Scriptures. This was because a "reader" read them before the formal worship commenced.

SUMMARY OF THE CHURCH ORDER

The main subjects that the Book of Discipline and the Book of Common Order dealt with are as follows:

- The Office-Bearers of the Church

The offices of Christ's Church according to God's Word were recognized as ministers, elders and deacons. Two temporary offices were also allowed, to meet the abnormal situation in the Reformed Church of Scotland at that time, when there was an acute shortage of ministers. These were the "offices" of "superintendent" and "reader". The "superintendent" was an experienced minister who had oversight of a region with other less experienced ministers and readers under him. The "readers" were educated, godly men, who would take "reading" services.

Each congregation had the right to elect its own minister, but ministers had to be examined by the Church. Ministers are responsible to see that the gospel be "truly and openly preached in every church and assembly of this realm". The gospel was defined as the whole spectrum of divine truth.

The sacraments could not be administered except where there was the preaching of the Word. The preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments was to be in the language of the people. In Scotland at that time that meant three languages! English, Scots and Gaelic after the manner prescribed in "the Order of Geneva". There was an insistence on a high standard of preaching. To merely read a sermon was "alike to have no minister at all, and to have an idol in the place of a true minister, yea, and in some cases it is worse". They felt that none should content themselves with having only a shadow of a real minister.

The principle of "extraordinary things may be done in extraordinary circumstances" was the concept behind the "superintendents" and "readers". This principle was also adopted at the time of the Westminster Assembly. They embodied it in the following way in the Form of Church-Government, Concerning the Doctrinal Part of Ordination of Ministers, No 11, "In extraordinary cases, something extraordinary may be done, until a settled order may be had, yet keeping as near as possibly may be to the rule."

Elders have an important place in the government of the Church according to the First Book of Discipline. They, with the minister, formed a local Presbytery, or council that guided the spiritual affairs of the local congregation. They also, with the minister, assisted in all public affairs of the Church, they judged and decided causes, gave admonition to the ungodly and exhorted men to godliness. They also were to take heed to "the life, manners, diligence, and study of the minister." They were for example, to admonish and correct him where desirable, and if worthy of deposition to proceed against him in the Church courts. There was a parity of minister and elders, and the minister was seen simply as an elder set apart for the special work of the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments. Elders were elected for one year only by a free vote of the congregation, but could be re-elected.

Deacons were to look after the financial interests of the Church but also were to care for the needy materially. Deacons were also elected for one year by a free vote of the congregation.

- Church Government

The First Book of Discipline did not lay down a graded series of assemblies of elders, such as a Kirk Session, Presbytery, Synod and General Assembly. They are however easily seen in a rudimentary form. For example, the minister, elders and deacons of a local congregation were required to meet at stated times – a Kirk Session. Ministers within six miles of the larger towns had to meet weekly, where there was the study and interpretation of the Scriptures or "prophesyings". It was to be also a time for considering doubts and for admonition – a Presbytery. The supervising ministers had to meet with the other ministers of his region from time to time – a Synod. Also, from the beginning the Reformed Church of Scotland had the General Assembly. This body was

representative of the whole country, and the ministers and elders of each place had a seat on it.

The local Church eldership or Kirk Session, as on the continent, originally exercised authority over more than one congregation. For example, there was one Session for all the congregations of Edinburgh, Glasgow etc. This was called the “lesser Presbytery” or “eldership”. As more congregations within a city called their own Sessions, this “lesser Presbytery” became known as the “greater eldership” or “classical Presbytery” and absorbed the “prophesyings” assemblies. It then assumed the present character of a Presbytery or Classis. Note also how from the beginning it was seen as very important that ministers met together regularly for discussion and prayer.

- Worship & Discipline

Worship was basically required to be the same as practiced by the Reformed Churches on the continent. There was only the singing of the psalms unaccompanied by musical instruments. There was a sermon and prayer and the reading of the Scriptures. The Christian Sabbath was “straitly kept”, with a morning worship service and in the afternoon there was an all-age Catechism class. All holy days, except the Lord’s Day were abolished as having no Biblical warrant. All vows of celibacy and the assumption of special religious apparel were declared to be sinful.

In Baptism water only was to be used, and all the Romanish additions of oil, salt, wax, spittle etc was forbidden as the inventions of men.

The Lord’s Supper was administered in both forms, and with simple ceremony. The Reformers of Scotland thought that the celebration of it four times in a year sufficient. Common communion cups were used, and those wishing to profess their faith and come to the Lord’s Supper had to be able to repeat the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments and the Creed before the elders. The people sat around a common table, and the elements of bread and wine were passed from member to member. It was laid down that, “The Table of the Lord is most rightly ministered when it approacheth most nigh to Christ’s own action,” at the Last Supper.

The offering could be taken at the door as was the Jewish custom.

There was essentially a Calvinist insistence on ecclesiastical discipline to which princes and preachers were also subject, contrary to the pre-reformation practice. The administration of discipline was entrusted to the ministers, elders and deacons, and is distinguished from the civil magistrate’s administration. The Church had the power of Biblical excommunication. There was to also be mutual censure and admonition of ministers.

The administration of the Church was basically at a congregational level. It was for the local officers to establish good order at this level so that the preaching of the Word, administration of the sacraments and the other parts of the worship of God could proceed unhindered and in a way edifying to the congregation.

- The Monies of the Church

The Roman Church had virtually ceased to exist by 1560, yet vast revenues came in from lands previously owned by it. The question was, what was to be done with this revenue? The First Book of Discipline proposed that three things be done with it. It was proposed that it be used for the maintenance of a gospel ministry, for the promotion of general education from a reformed (Biblical) world and life view and the support of the poor. This last work was seen as a sacred trust from Christ. The section in this document on Education is most extensive. The reformers of Scotland, as on the continent, placed such an importance on the Christian education of the youth of the church, it was scarcely less than the importance they gave to the true preaching of the word and the right administration of the sacraments. The ideal was “a kirk and a school in every parish”.

The care of the poor was also very close to the heart of the Church, and that in a material and practical way the mercies of Christ be extended to those most in need of it.

The main headings of The First Book of Discipline are: Of Doctrine; Of the Sacraments; Abolishing Idolatry; Of Ministers; Of Provision for Ministers; Of Superintendents; Of Schools; Of Universities; Of the Rents of the Church; Of Discipline; Of Election of Elders & Deacons; Of the Policy of the Kirk;

CONCLUSION

The Reformed Church of Scotland had a great spiritual battle to fight to bring order to the Church of Christ as based upon His Word. While the fruits of their labours did not receive the support of the Parliament of its day, the Church bravely and faithfully worked at organizing itself after the principles of God’s Word in spite of every discouragement. It did not believe it was dependent upon the State to give effect to how it should order itself. It refused also to accept that the State should be excused from recognizing the ideals of God’s Word for the ordering of the Church. These various sentiments found fresh expression in The Second Book of Discipline of 1578. By that time however, Knox had been gathered to a better country, and the labours of that work fell to other faithful soldiers and servants of Christ Jesus.

The teaching and practice of the Church Order that was adopted by the Reformed Church of Scotland in the days of

John Knox may seem rather ordinary to those of us to whom the reformed faith is the most consistent expression of the Word of God. We should realize though that it was revolutionary in its day. The principles and practices of it was a radical return by the Church from man centred self- rule, to Biblical rule by Christ in the Church, with all its attendant blessings. In our Church Order we are the heirs of the godly reformers, and are privileged to enjoy the fruits and blessings of their labours.

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