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THE HISTORY OF PRESBYTERIANISM IN ILLINOIS.

(By H. D. JENKINS, D.D.)

The history of a particular denomination in a particular state can have a general interest only as it can be shown to have influenced the development of the commonwealth in things that make for the general good. However dear the child to its parents, however bright the boy or beautiful the girl, the public will not demand that its biography be written unless in its later years it may affect the State by its affecting the larger life of the community. The important part played by the Presbyterian Church in the civil, moral and religious life of Illinois during the past one hundred years may well justify the call for a sketch to be printed and filed away among the archives of the State Historical Society.

WHAT IS A PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH?

When a witty Boston girl was asked "Where is Boston?" she is said to have replied, "Where is Boston? Why, Boston is not a place; it is a way of looking at things." So whatever else Presbyterianism may be or may not be, it emphatically is a way of looking at things. In organizing the World's Council of Presbyterian churches, it was left to the distinguished scholar, Prof. Philip Schaff, to say what constituted a Presbyterian church. And his definition stands today in the charter of that council. "A Presbyterian church is a church having a reformed (or Calvinistic) creed and a Presbyterian (representative) form of government."

A creed in which the sovereignty of God is made prominent is popularly called "Calvinistic," but among church historians it is called "Reformed," since at the time of the Reformation it was accepted by all Protestants except the Lutherans. But the belief in that sovereignty is older than Calvin, older than Augustine who laid stress upon it, older than Paul's Epistle to the Romans, indeed as old as human thought. It forms the basis of every philosophical system and runs through all the mighty dramas of the old Greek world. That "God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass," is accepted by Hindu, Moslem and Greek alike, but that God is not the author of sin and man is free as tested by his own consciousness and the words of Holy Scripture, marks the line between Moslem fatalism and Christian sovereignty. "Every man," said Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "is a Calvinist when he prays." The Presbyterian believes that God is the one only original first cause of all things, including conversion and salvation. It is not my duty to defend Presbyterianism, but only to define it. And the

Presbyterian Church does not hold or teach the sovereignty of God any more than it does the free will of man. The Calvinist does not "reconcile" these antinomies any more than he does any other of the many antinomies of philosophy included in the definitions of time, space, matter, spirit, or being itself.

But if a mighty faith in the Sovereignty of Almighty God has given vigor to the Presbyterian church, its representative form of government has made it the special champion of our Republican form of government in America.

The Supreme Court of the United States in repeated decisions has set forth the relation of American churches to the civil state. The state with us regards all churches as voluntary societies into which the member enters (or in which he remains) of his own free will. He assents to the rules of a church and must submit to its form of government because he has himself chosen it or continued it. These forms of government are three. The first, or prelatical, is that in which the bishop is the ruler. The private member surrenders all his natural rights in church affairs to the prelatical authorities who hold office for life. The third form is that of congregationalism in which the private member surrenders nothing, but decides everything from the form of the creed to the exercise of discipline by a popular vote. The last vote taken is the only law. This is pure democracy, a democracy without constitution, without precedent and without appeal. The second, or middle form, is that called Presbyterian, in which the whole body of communicants forms the church and the written constitution the binding law. The details of administration are carried on by chosen representatives who are bound by the written constitution of the church but otherwise conduct the government of a church free from popular reversal. This, it will be seen, is the model upon which our civil state, is erected the practical administration of affairs being placed in the hands of a few representatives but these representatives being bound by the constitutional law of the whole body.

THE BEGINNINGS OF AMERICAN PRESBYTERIANISM.

The churches of New England were Calvinistic in their creed but Congregational in their form of government. The churches of Maryland and Virginia were, so far as their founders were concerned, prelatic in their government. But about 1641 a small number of worshippers near New York began the formation of Calvinistic churches with Presbyterian forms of government, and these in 1705 formed a Presbytery, which Presbytery in 1717 was recast as a Synod, and in 1788 the foundations of a national general assembly were laid. The first meeting of the national body was held in 1789. In 1800 its missionaries crossed the Alleghenies; in 1810 its organization embraced parts of Kentucky and Tennessee, and two years later its first explorers, Samuel J. Mills and John F. Schermerhorn, were skirting the river fronts of this State seeking for that lodgment which two years later—1814—they accomplished.

It was not, however, until 1816 that the first Presbyterian church in what is now Illinois completed its organization under the leadership of Rev. James McGready, a missionary from Kentucky, and this little

rural church at Sharon, in what is now White County, had to wait eight years until (in 1824) it had a minister of its own in the person of Rev. Benjamin Franklin Spilman, justly called "the Father of Presbyterianism in Illinois."

At that time there were supposed to be about 15,000 white persons in the territory. The territory became a state in 1818. And the settlements were practically all along the river fronts as the rivers then afforded the only way of communication with the outer world. Sharon, where the first Presbyterian church in the State was organized, now ninety-seven years ago, was a farming community near the Wabash River and not far from its junction with the Ohio. Its people were perhaps all from across the river. But Golconda, where a Presbyterian church was organized in 1819, being on the Ohio River itself, was a more promising field, and Shawneetown, where on his first visit Mr. Spilman found only one woman and no man professing a Christian faith, had a church which he formed in 1826. So we have now three Presbyterian churches in this part of the new State, the result of ten years' labor, and we may note in passing that Mr. Spilman in six years of his labor preached 959 sermons and traveled 3,688 miles on horseback, as his diary records.

Meanwhile Rev. Salmon Giddings, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, Mo., was not idle. He made frequent missionary trips across the Father of Waters and organized a church at Shoal Creek, in 1819, another at Edwardsville in the same year and a third at Turkey Creek the year following. Thus while the first church was organized in the southeastern section of the State the first three churches to form a group were gathered on the prairies opposite St. Louis.

It was a little later—1829—that a young graduate of Princeton walked into the office of the American Home Missionary Society in New York and requested to be sent to any place "where no other man would go." The society immediately dispatched him to Galena, Ill. This section was just then attracting a mob of prospectors because of its recently exploited lead mines. This aspirant for a difficult field was Rev. Aratus Kent, a man of truly apostolic courage, faith and zeal. His coming to Galena was as the breaking of the dawn over the regions of darkness, although, welcome as he was, it was not until nearly three years later that even the smallest church could be formed. But the churches of Elizabeth, Hanover, Apple River, Freeport, Rockford and Belvidere followed, until a junction may be said to have been formed in the forties with the settlements about Chicago, where another pioneer missionary, Rev. Jeremiah Porter, had begun his work in 1833. This chaplain in the regular army had organized a church in Fort Dearborn, largely composed of soldiers who had been converted under his preaching at Fort Brady, Sault Ste. Marie, where the battalion was then stationed.

On the 30th of January, 1828, the Presbyterian Church of Sangamon, with two places of worship but no fixed home, was organized by Rev. John M. Ellis, to which Rev. John G. Bergen came as a pastor about a year later. The church building later erected and dedicated—1831—was the first brick church in Illinois. Its interesting history has recently been written by its former pastor, Rev. Thomas D. Logan, D.D. This

became a center of missionary activity in the center of the State. It was called the First Presbyterian Church of Springfield later.

The tide of immigration was now at its flood and Presbyterian churches sprung up rapidly at Peoria, Rushville, Ottawa and all around these sites. In 1816 the little church at Sharon was the only Presbyterian organization in the territory, but twenty years later we know from the reports made to the General Assembly there were not less than 60 ministers, 76 churches, and 2,390 church members in Illinois. Today there are in this State 606 Presbyterian ministers, 597 churches, and 99,944 members, with a net gain of over 5,000 members each year. The federal census recognizes 130 to 150 "religious denominations" in the United States. But Presbyterianism has today in Illinois alone a larger membership than any one of more than 125 of these "denominations," some of which maintain a bureau to keep their name before the public and assert their growth to the people. The Presbyterian in Illinois may be pardoned if he feels that he is, as St. Paul said of his Tarsian citizenship, "a citizen of no mean city."

But the most important question after all is:

FOR WHAT DOES ILLINOIS PRESBYTERIANISM STAND?

Judging by its history, apart from its maintaining the Reformed Faith and the Representative Form of Government,

IT HAS STOOD FOR FREE SCHOOLS.

Up to the coming of such men as Mr. Spilman, Mr. Giddings, Mr. Bergen, Father Kent and Chaplain Jeremiah Porter to this State, there had been more or less itinerant preaching by other ministers, whose qualifications for their work may be summed up by one of the Baptist historians who says that "one-third of the early ministers of his church were a benefit to their denomination; another third did no harm, but the last third helped the enemy more than they helped the cause they advocated." Governor Ford asserts in his History of Illinois that there was only one "educated" minister settled in the State before 1820.

But I have carefully traced the biographies of the first fifteen Presbyterian ministers noted in connection with the founding of our work in this State—preachers between 1816 and 1836—and found that fourteen of the fifteen were graduates of the best colleges in the United States, more coming from Harvard than from any other one source; not a few were from Princeton and others from Dartmouth, Union and so on. They "endured hardness as good soldiers of Jesus Christ" and such of them as have left us diaries or biographies of their labors, show us that they braved merciless suns and furious blizzards; ate the coarse food of the pioneer settler and slept on the bare floor of the log cabin, or in default of that, in the stable or under the open sky. Yet they carried with them the culture of the schools and that love of books, both of which have always characterized our ministry.

Almost every rude home in which the parson found refuge was converted into a schoolhouse for its vicinity. The men founded perhaps

scores of academies, which have given place to the modern high school, but there still survive under denominational care some of the best academies in the State. And what may surprise even some loyal Presbyterians, we have in Illinois five fully equipped and well endowed colleges, such as Illinois College at Jacksonville, Blackburn College at Carlinville, Lake Forest College, Lincoln and Decatur, in all enrolling upwards of 3,000 students and so placed that they bring an education near to the homes of those who need the inducement of contiguity to rouse their ambition.

And it was Illinois College, founded by Presbyterians in Jacksonville as early as 1829, that gave to the State Newton Bateman, "the father of the free school system of Illinois," after which system the systems of practically all the western states are modeled. It is true the public school had been outlined as early as 1822 by far-seeing men, but the laws which were needed for organization and support were repealed and almost as soon as passed and Governor Ford reports that up to 1847 there was "no common school system worthy of the name" and there were no adequate funds. But during these troubled years more than one Presbytery put itself on record as urging free schools for all the people and appealing to the church as a whole to vote for men in sympathy with the movement. It is Newton Bateman, graduate of its first college—the college also from which our present Secretary of State of the United States, comes—to whom we owe an admirable system which has imitators round the world.

But not less in importance we remember that

PRESBYTERIANISM IN ILLINOIS HAS ALWAYS STOOD FOR FREE LABOR.

Very few persons know anything of the bitter fight which was made between 1816 and 1824 to convert Illinois into a slave State. Indeed Illinois was a slave State when admitted to the Union in 1818, in spite of the ordinance of 1787 which distinctly prohibited slavery in all the territory north of the Ohio River. But in that ordinance the rights, customs and privileges of the old French (Catholic) inhabitants were guaranteed to them; and as they all owned slaves this was interpreted by the courts to continue such slaves in slavery, and by further interpretation, their children after them were to be slaves! And so it came about that 800 slaves were reported in the federal census of 1840. Many anti-slavery Presbyterians of Kentucky and Tennessee and even from North Carolina, had come to Illinois to set their slaves free, which they were not permitted to do in their native states; but even in Illinois they found it a matter of difficulty as they were required to give bonds for the conduct and support of such negroes as long as they should live, and every trick known to the demagogue was resorted to to make freedom odious and unprofitable if not impossible in this State. Long trains of immigrants from the border states passed every summer through this territory with teams and retinues of slaves on their way to Missouri, a slave state, and many of the settlers felt that could they arrest this stream and give to these wealthy families from the South the laws which had protected their "property" in their old homes, the future of Illinois

would be assured and affluent. It might almost be said that the contest "for" or "against" slavery was the only political issue for all these years. And when, in 1820, the Legislature advocated calling a convention to revise the constitution, then only two years old, in the interests of the slaveholder, a contest was precipitated which was continued without intermission for four years. As every historian acknowledges, the Presbyterian church defeated the attempt. That Illinois was never legally a slave state we owe to such men as Spilman, Edwards, Kent, and Jeremiah Porter, the four men who held the fort for freedom in strategic centers, such as Shawneetown, Edwardsville, Springfield, Chicago, and Galena. Nevertheless while the call for pro-slavery convention was defeated in 1824, "black laws" of so iniquitous a character were passed by one legislature after another, that the fight for the civil rights of negroes in this State was never ended until the Civil War turned the scale forever in the favor of universal free labor.

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN ILLINOIS HAS ALWAYS STOOD FOR FREE SPEECH AND A FREE PRESS.

Of course there were pro-slavery preachers in some of our pulpits and protestants against "agitation" were to be found in every Presbytery. But I doubt if there was a single Presbytery in the State which had not at some time or other distinctly put itself on the side of free speech and a free press. The first attempt to hold an anti-slavery meeting in Peoria was called to meet in the Main Street Presbyterian Church, 1843. But it was driven from the auditorium by a mob "composed of the wealth and respectability of Peoria" as the papers said next day. Six years before that, at a meeting of the Synod of Illinois in the old First Presbyterian Church of Springfield, October 19, 1837, Rev. Jeremiah Porter, chaplain of the troops at Chicago and founder of the First Church there, preached an anti-slavery sermon before the Synod which roused such bitter hostility that it was only the personal courage to Edward D. Baker—who died twenty-five years later at the head of his brigade at Ralls Bluff—that saved the speaker from violence. Edward Beecher at this meeting silenced the men "in the back seats" who sought to suppress freedom of debate, and it was here Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy attended his last meeting, for he was shot three weeks later when attempting to set up an anti-slavery press at Alton. It was the fact that such men as Governor Coles and Governor Edwards would not be silenced, and that such men as Rev. Thomas Lippincott insisted upon freedom of the press in his *Edwardsville Spectator* that the defeat of all the attempts to make Illinois a silent if not active partner in slavery is due.

But finally we may say that:

PRESBYTERIANISM IN ILLINOIS HAS ALWAYS STOOD FOR FREE GIVING.

I mean, of course by this, that it has been noted for the large and wise benevolence of its members. Its 100,000 communicants last year

gave but little short of \$1,000,000 to the benevolences which are recognized as regular church channels. They contributed at the same time much more than \$1,500,000 to the support of their own churches. And were we to include the individual gifts of such men as Cyrus McCormick, whose gifts to our theological seminary run up into the millions; or of such men as the late John Crear, who founded and endowed the Crear Library for research at a cost of \$2,000,000, now worth twice that; or of John V. Farwell, the father and nursing mother of the Chicago Y. M. C. A.; or Henry B. Crowell, the president of the Quaker Oats Corporation and chief backer of the Moody Institute in Chicago—to mention only four Presbyterians, all elders in Chicago—it would be easy to show that Presbyterianism is not a cloudy, metaphysical system of “lunar politics,” but a living faith, holding fast the forms of sound doctrine and not remiss in the acts which prove faith by deeds.