

United Presbyterian Beginnings*

By JAMES ALBERT WOODBURN

Last May the United Presbyterian Church in its General Assembly in Pittsburgh celebrated the seventy-fifth anniversary of its beginning. This was not an anniversary of the beginning of its faith, as that goes back much further, but of the organization, or union, by which they came to take the name, *United Presbyterian*.

In 1858 two small branches of the Presbyterian faith united after more than a century of separation. These were the *Associate Presbyterians* and *Associate Reformed Presbyterians*. The two had a common origin and a common creed and all differences between them had long since ceased to be. After years of effort and persuasion they came together to form the United Presbyterian Church of our day.

The larger of these two bodies was the Associate Reformed Presbyterians. They were themselves the result of a union. The Reformed Presbyterians, whom we call Covenanters, had come to America in colonial and revolutionary times. Their first missionary to the colonies came in 1752. The Associate Presbyterians also came to America in these early years. Two of their missionaries came from the Associate Synod of Edinburgh in 1753. In 1754 an Associate Presbytery was organized in America.

*The United Presbyterian Congregation of Bloomington, Indiana, observed its one hundredth anniversary on Sept. 22-24, 1938. This Congregation resulted from unions which brought together three distinct congregations that were established in Bloomington a century ago. The first of the three, the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Congregation, was organized on Sept. 7, 1833. The Rev. William Turner was pastor from 1835 to 1869. The Associate Presbyterian Congregation, better known as "Seceders," was organized in 1836. The Rev. I. N. Laughead was the first pastor, serving from 1839 to 1843. The Rev. John Bryan, father of President William Lowe Bryan of Indiana University and of former President Enoch Albert Bryan of Washington State College (Pullman, Washington), was the pastor from 1855 to 1862. Following the denominational union of 1858, these two Congregations became known as the First and Second United Presbyterian Churches of Bloomington. On April 27, 1863, the two Congregations united and worshipped together in the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church which was located on the site of the old United Presbyterian Cemetery on West Eighth Street until the union with the New Light Reformed Presbyterian ("Covenanter") Congregation at College and Ninth Streets in 1869. It was in 1870 that the present brick edifice at this location was erected. This third Congregation (New Light Covenanter), had separated from the Old Light Congregation in 1833. Prof. Theophilus Wylie of Indiana University was pastor of the New Light Covenanter Congregation from 1838 until 1869. Since 1870, the following ministers have served the United Presbyterians: W. P. McNary (1870-1884); S. R. Lyons (1885-1898); W. A. Littell (1899-1901); J. D. Barr (1902-1906); T. H. Hanna (1907-1917); J. L. Kelso (1919-1923); J. Merle Rife (1924-1927); J. W. Meloy (1928-). Dr. James A. Woodburn was a member of the United Presbyterian Church of Bloomington for fifty years, Superintendent of the Bible School and a teacher in the Bible School. In 1883 the Congregation observed its semi-centennial anniversary with James A. Woodburn as its historian, and William L. Bryan chairman of the committee.—*Rev. John W. Meloy.*

These two branches of the church, the Associate and the Reformed Presbyterian, were both small bodies. They had like principles and practices and the same causes for their separation from the Church of Scotland. In 1782 a union was formed between them. The united body took both names, becoming the *Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church*.

As nearly always happens in attempting such a church union, a small body of dissenters in both bodies stood out and refused to join the union. So instead of two churches becoming *one*, they became *three*, and there still remained Reformed Presbyterians, Associate Presbyterians, and the new union body, the Associate Reformed Presbyterians.

As we know, the Reformed Presbyterians still exist as a separate body. Their presbytery was re-organized in 1798 led by the Rev. McLeod and the Rev. Samuel Brown Wylie, the father of Professor T. A. Wylie so long connected with Indiana University. They have about 8,000 members in America. One of their best congregations, a worthy body of our fellow Christians, exists in this community. It is happily represented here tonight. In the history of our faith they are our kith and kin.

Of these dissenting Presbyterian bodies the Covenanters (Reformed Presbyterians) were the first to be founded in this community. They were organized here as early as 1821. John Moore and Isaac Faris were the ruling elders. There were eight members at the first organization. In 1825 Thomas Moore and James Blair were added to the session. They now had twenty members. Soon the Smiths and the Woodburns came with old fashioned families—eleven in the Woodburn family. In 1830 David Smith and Dorrance B. Woodburn were added to the session. James Faris was the Covenanter pastor here from 1827 until 1855. The Smiths referred to are the ancestors of Dean Henry Lester Smith of the School of Education, Indiana University.

It is an interesting coincidence that the year 1833, the year we celebrate for the founding of the main branch of the United Presbyterians in this community, marked a division in the Covenanter body. They divided that year into the "New Side" branch and the "Old Side" branch, or the "New Lights" and the "Old Lights". The dispute was as to whether it was right or permissible for Covenanters to vote and to exercise

the rights of citizenship under the Constitution of the United States, in which God is not recognized as the supreme ruler of the nation.

The New Side Church was willing to allow its members to vote, to sit on juries, to hold offices and to take an oath to support the Constitution of the United States, if in so doing they consented to no sinful act. The Old Side Church held to the old tradition and in a new covenant of 1871 asserted for its members that they "would pray for and labor for the peace and welfare of our country and for its reformation by a constitutional recognition of God as the source of all power and of Jesus Christ as the Ruler of Nations." They would continue to refuse "to incorporate with the political body until this blessed reformation had been secured." Such has continued to be the difference between these two bodies of Reformed Presbyterians.

The New Side Covenanters in Bloomington dissolved their organization in 1869, and under the advice of Professor T. A. Wylie, who had been their pastor for thirty years, most of its members joined the United Presbyterians. Some families went to the regular Presbyterians, among them the Dinsmores and the Smalls. Between 1870 and 1881 several presbyteries of the New Side Covenanter church went into the Presbyterian church. Some presbyteries, however, still remain separate. As late as 1925 this small branch of the church had in America about 2,400 members with fifteen churches and fifteen ministers.

Dr. T. A. Wylie constantly advised the union of the churches. After 1869 he himself worshiped in the United Presbyterian church until the Philadelphia Presbytery of his Reformed Presbyterian body joined the regular Presbyterians. Then he became a Presbyterian. A few words about Professor Wylie and some passages from his Diary may be of interest here.

Dr. Wylie was ordained "to the office of the holy ministry" at Princeton, Indiana, on July 22, 1838. He was a modest, retiring man, quite timid in public, who considered himself unfit for the ministry. "The office was not one of my own choosing", says he in his diary. "Had I my own way I never would have been in it, but it seems it was my fate. I was thrown into the current. I made some exertions to extricate

myself. I found these vain and at last determined to let matters take their course and to submit to whatever might happen. I have been sometimes so vain as to think that in my difficulties I have had divine aid. But still there is something wanting”.

On August 6, 1838 he made this entry: “Yesterday I preached, but such preaching! I am sure if it were possible I would not listen to such a preacher; how, then, can I blame others if they stay away? O, that it were otherwise?”

The Associate Presbyterians, sometimes called “Seceders,” the other branch in the forming of the United Presbyterians in 1858, continued as a separate congregation in Bloomington until 1864. The Associate and the Associate Reformed bodies had become United Presbyterians, but they were separate congregations here for six years after the union at large.

This branch of the church (“Seceders”) was organized in Bloomington in 1836 with twenty-four members under the leadership of the Rev. James M. Henderson. Samuel Wylie, Andrew Roddy, Robert Courley, and John McKissock were the ruling elders. Among others there were Browns, Calhouns, Harrahs, Neills, Phillipsees, Robinsons, Services and Storgies in the congregation.

For four years, 1839-43, the Rev. I. N. Lawhead was their minister. For some years they relied upon irregular supplies. In 1855 the Rev. John Bryan, father of President Bryan, became their pastor, continuing in that relation until his congregation went into the United Presbyterian Church in 1864.

The “Seceders” were, perhaps, the stiffest of these stiff-backed, psalm-singing Scotch-Irish Presbyterians. In faith, practice and worship, they were not greatly different from their kindred co-religionists, the Covenanters and the Associate Reformed Presbyterians. It may be they were a little more strict, or “set,” in their ways. With all of these folks the creed was a vital matter, and they were ready to offer a bill of particulars. They had received their creed from Calvin and Knox. Their Sabbath services usually consumed most of the day. They had two long sermons, one in the forenoon and one in the afternoon, with a brief noon intermission. They were long on sermons. The preacher expounded the scripture, often giving an argumentative defense of beliefs of the members.

The minister always explained the psalm before it was sung—a critical discourse almost as long as a modern sermon. They were a strict, close-communion church and they zealously barred from their communion all who did not accept their faith, and also all of their own members who by their misconduct or “neglect of the ordinances” (failing to go to church) or by “breaking the Sabbath,” had fallen from grace or had lapsed from the standards. They were very strict sabbatarians, and trials before the session were frequent for Sabbath-breaking and not infrequent for over-indulgence in Scotch whisky. They were usually quite thorough in what they took, or undertook. Three-point-two beer would have had no attraction for them.

It was this stiffness of creed and practice (no reference here to drinking) that led Alexander Campbell and his father Thomas Campbell, originally Scotch Seceders, to leave that body and to seek to establish a milder and more tolerant religion, or, as the Scotch Seceder would say, a more “easy going” religion.

Another excerpt from Professor Wylie’s Diary will illustrate the character of these Scotch Presbyterian services in this community nearly a hundred years ago:

Sabbath 12th August, 1838. This morning I rose about 6½. . . .
About 10 o'clock started in company with Dr. Hamill to go to the Seceder church, where the sacrament was to be held; got there about 11 o'clock (the church was a few miles east of Bloomington). The psalm had been explained. Mr. Hall preached from the words “And they crucified Jesus.” The sermon was good, nothing extraordinary, however. After an intermission of a few minutes the exercises were continued by a Mr. Henderson. He began to exhort to the duty of self-examination, which amounts to the same thing as *debarring* (putting the bars up at the communion table). His general remarks, observations on the particular sins to which they were to direct their attention,—the performance of this duty occupied about *two hours and a half*. It was the most tedious piece of work that I ever listened to. All that he said during this time I am sure might have been said to a much better purpose in half an hour. After a very abrupt termination the tables were filled, the blessing asked, the words of the institution read but not explained, and the address (to the communicants) was spun out about half an hour long, neither good nor bad. After that I left. I am sure that my feelings were not such as they ought to have been. Where was the fault? Was it in me, or in the services, or in both? I expect it will be the truest to say the last.

What a miserable thing it is to me that these church affairs are so irksome to me; there does appear to be so much cant about them. Is it because that I, in my present condition cannot perceive the beauty of these things because they are spiritually discerned? I fear that this is too much the case. I am not good enough nor bad enough to be a preacher. I am not good enough because I do not take the pleasure in the things of God that I ought to do. I cannot meditate on them with pleasure, my mind will wander after some thing more congenial to its disposition. Nor am I bad enough, for if I could act the hypocrite a little better, the desire for distinction and popularity might make me study harder and keep up better outside than I do. I might declaim against "human compositions" (hymns) and defections in other churches and "occasional hearing," and whenever I should see any of the people have some pious remark to make; if any thing had happened, call it providence, and I might say my prayers loud enough for the people to hear.

"Occasional hearing" was the sin of attending the church of another denomination and listening to an heretical minister who was outside the fold. The Seceders and Covenanters were pretty strict about this. My recollection is that my own father (a Covenanter) was called before the session on this account. He attended singing schools, too, where hymns of "human composition" may have been used in teaching and practice. The guardians of the faith must have thought that he was on the road to hopeless worldliness.

Though leaving the church that day before the services were ended, Dr. Wylie reports that he got home about six o'clock. Mr. Pering, the Principal of the Girls' Seminary, came in for an evening visit. Dr. Wylie adds:

I might have mentioned that Mr. Henderson debarred all who would sing any human compositions in worship, or would learn to sing by using verses of hymns. Our sacrament is coming. How am I to dispense it?

All this goes to show, in the light of recent years, how change and growth have worked among these good Scotch folk, and how the "good old days," as we approach them, are always found receding into the more distant past.

According to the Record Book of the Session it was on September 7, 1833, that the Associate Reformed Congregation was organized in this community. This is the event we celebrate tonight. The Rev. Mr. Reynolds of Decatur county acted as Moderator. Mr. William Fee was the only elder. There were Currys, Cherrys, Millens, Hannahs, and Johnstons. Soon came the Harbisons, Wilsons, Weirs, Moffetts, Strongs, Henrys, McCaws, McCallas, Millers, and others, from South

Carolina. In June, 1836, the Rev. William Turner from Pendleton, South Carolina, was installed as pastor of the congregation. He continued in pastoral service for thirty-three years, when (1869) his congregation removed from their house of worship on West Eighth street to the present site (corner of Ninth and College Avenue) and began the erection of the present building. Then the Rev. W. P. McNary was called to the pastorate. For a number of years, three former pastors, the Rev. T. A. Wylie, the Rev. William Turner, and the Rev. John Bryan resided here and sat with the United congregation in this house of worship. Each frequently led the worship, breaking unto the people the bread of life.

As in the previous attempt at union in 1782, so in that of 1858, there were dissenters in both bodies who refused to join the union. The Associate Reformed Presbyterians who refused to become United Presbyterians in 1858 were almost all in the South. Sectional differences over slavery and the Civil War prevented them from becoming a part of the United Presbyterian Church. They have not yet joined. How persistent is separation, and how hard is it for brethren to come together in unity. In 1925 the Southern Associate Reformed Church had 17,200 members, mostly in the Carolinas. They are our near kin. They may be thought of as the *United Presbyterian Church South*. There is no difference between them and the United Presbyterians, unless our recent more liberal attitude on psalmody may have further estranged our southern brethren. So far as I know there are no former Associate Reformed Presbyterians north of the old Mason and Dixon's line.

At the Union of 1858 eleven Seceder ministers (Associate Presbyterians) refused to enter the Union. In 1925 their Synod reported ten presbyteries, eleven churches, five ministers and about three hundred-fifty members, enough to make one fair sized congregation. They are the children of the original *come-outers* of 1733 and they will no doubt remain *stay-outers* to the end.

It is another coincidence that while we are celebrating the one hundredth anniversary of the beginning of this congregation (or its main branch), the church of Scotland is celebrating the two hundredth anniversary of the secession movement in that country. It is in that Scottish secession of 1733 that the United Presbyterians find their ecclesiastical origin. It

was in that year that the founders of this church stood stoutly for the true Presbyterian faith and practices which they had inherited from their fathers from the days of Knox and Calvin. They stood for their faith even at the expense of schism in the mother church. Our church history, both in Scotland and America, has vindicated its cause.

Before 1733 our ecclesiastical ancestors were members of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. After the struggle with the Stuart Kings, the law of the realm, while recognizing Episcopacy as the form of church government for England recognized Presbyterianism for Scotland. It should be remembered that the regular Presbyterian Church in Scotland was an established church—a state church subject in large degree to state and civil control. Here, in large measure, was the rub between contending parties in the church which led to the famous Secession of 1733.

By the Revolution of 1688 civil and religious liberties had been restored to the Scottish people. Presbyterianism was recognized both in the settlement of 1689 and in the Parliamentary Union of England and Scotland in 1707. But the puritan party in the church felt that the state continued to interfere too much in ecclesiastical affairs. This offended the Covenanters who refused to accept what they regarded as the compromising settlement of 1689, which authorized certain state powers over the church. The result was that the Covenanters came out. They refused to recognize the authority of the General Assembly of Scotland. For many years they had no special ecclesiastical organization. They formed societies which met in their homes, in their barns, or in caves, and this they continued to do even after the accession of William and Mary. It was not until 1743 that they formed an organization called the Reformed Presbytery of Scotland.

Abuses against which the Covenanters protested continued within the established church of Scotland. It became very courtly, that is, more dependent on the court and the rich landed patrons for favor and support. It became more worldly, more loose in morals and lax in discipline. Strange and questionable doctrines were taught by professors of theology, and the true "marrow of modern divinity," or the good old orthodoxy, was losing its hold upon the church.

The controlling state party stood for centralization of power. It sought to make the Assembly supreme, to impose its will on presbyteries and congregations. In the Presbyterian system the real power lies in the presbyteries. If an overture, or a proposed change in the law, is sent down to the presbyteries for approval and a majority of the presbyteries reject it, it is rejected. Not so in the days when the reforming Scottish Seceders had their quarrel with the church. Those in power were clearly violating in many instances the fundamental constitution of the church.

The main subject of controversy arose over the question of patronage. Should the people continue to elect and call their ministers as the ancient Presbyterian constitution provided? Or should the minister be assigned or presented to the congregation by some lay lord, or magistrate, or civil authority? There were many disputed settlements. The General Assembly sought to compel presbyteries to give effect to "presentations." For a time and in certain places, presbyteries resisted and disregarded the nominations made by lay patrons, and proceeded to settle over the congregations the ministers elected by the people. When they did their chosen men were the legal ministers but they could not claim the stipends which came from the magistrates, lay patrons, or church lands. The members of the moderate party in the established church of Scotland were not ready for this financial sacrifice; they were ready to submit to the presentations from powerful patrons. The "call" always held to be essential was less and less regarded and was finally declared to be unnecessary. The Assembly declared that the church courts were bound to install any qualified presentee.

Lay patronage in the church came to be regarded as part of the order of things. The presbyteries ceased to resist presentations. But to many ministers and members this was a serious grievance. In 1712, in Anne's time, an act was passed by Parliament that strengthened the practice of patronage. The act was passed in spite of the protest and remonstrance of the Scottish people who still wished to hold to the Presbyterian system. In a score of years a gradual change came about. The established church of Scotland had become indifferent to the "calling" of ministers.

There was a sad catalogue of forced settlements in the history of the Scottish Church before and after 1733. Often when an unpopular presentee was settled over the people, many quietly left the state church and built "meeting-houses." In thirty years following 1733, there were one hundred-twenty "meeting-houses" in Scotland. Not all who believed with the Seceders followed them out of the church; many continued the struggle within the church.

Such was the controversy in the Scottish church over the appointment of Presbyterian ministers within the first third of the eighteenth century and after. It seemed that the state, or magistrates, or lay lords, were coming into the control of the church. As to calling ministers it had come to be the settled practice by the compliance of the General Assembly that congregations were to be allowed to "concur" as to the minister assigned, but not to "call." The Seceders refused to concur. To them the abuse seemed like Episcopacy which they had so long opposed. They held out for the right of election, a right guaranteed to them from the beginning by the constitution and usage of the Presbyterian church. They were standing on good ground. It is clear that the church should have given more weight to the wishes of the people. Lay patronage and state control should have been resisted. The soundness of this position, which was the position of the secessionists of 1733, is conceded today by the whole reunited church of Scotland. I know of no Presbyterian Church anywhere in the world today that does not concede it and live by it.

The leader of the Secession of 1733, from which United Presbyterians sprang, was the Rev. Ebenezer Erskine, minister at Sterling. In 1732 before his Synod he preached his historic sermon, in which he spoke against the heresies and corruptions of the times and stood for the right of the people to call their own ministers and to govern their own churches. In his sermon he accused the established Presbyterians and the moderate party of "an attempt to jostle Christ out of the Church."

An act of the General Assembly of 1732 had abolished the last remnant of popular election. It provided that where patrons might neglect or decline to exercise the right of presentation, the minister was to be chosen, not by the congregation, but by the elders and Protestant heritors (landowners or

proprieters). The Assembly had passed this act although the presbyteries to which it had been submitted as an overture had disapproved of it by a large majority. The protests of the dissenting majority were disregarded. Erskine referred to all such acts of the Assembly as "unscriptural and unconstitutional." They certainly were unconstitutional, and to any one who believes that the Presbyterian form of government is founded on the scriptures, these acts were unscriptural.

Members of the Synod objected to Erskine's vigorous and outspoken utterances and he was censured for them. He appealed to the General Assembly which sustained the Synod's censure in May, 1733. Erskine protested and held himself at liberty "to teach the same truths and to testify against the same errors on every proper occasion." That was the right spirit. As children of the Covenanters and Seceders we rejoice in it. In his protest Erskine was joined by William Wilson (Perth), Alexander Moncrief (Abernethy), and James Fisher (Kinclaven). A little later Ralph Erskine, the brother of Ebenezer, joined the dissenting group.

Because of their protest, the dissenting ministers were severed from their charges, their churches declared vacant, and all ministerial functions were denied them. They then felt obliged to secede from the church courts. In December, 1733, they constituted themselves into an independent presbytery. In 1734 they published their "Testimony," setting forth the grounds of their secession. It has stood the test of time. In 1736 they began to organize churches. By 1745 the "Associate Presbytery" had forty-five congregations and became the Associate Synod. In 1747 a division occurred. It was the unfortunate division of "Burgher" and "Anti-Burgher." Those who condemned the swearing of the burgess oath as sinful were known as "Anti-Burgher." Those who contended that abstaining from the oath or accepting it should not be made a test of communion, were called "Burghers." Taking the oath or rejecting it, they contended, ought to be left to the individual conscience of each member.

The "Anti-Burghers" refused to hold friendly conferences with the others. They passed sentences of excommunication on the Erskines themselves and on the ministers who held the

opposing view. The law of "occasional hearing" arose and faithful members were not permitted to hear pastors of an opposing fold.

This division lasted until 1820 when there was a happy reunion. This cause for division never existed in America, nor could have existed, nevertheless the separation existed here for nearly three-quarters of a century.

It might have been better if I had not mentioned this uncomely division. Yet there may be a lesson in it. It may be useful in bringing our Scotch minds to reflect that it is better to avoid quarrels and argumentations that lead to church divisions on convictions of minor importance.

It was on the Secession ground of 1733, essentially, that the greater division in the Scottish church occurred in 1843. It was then that the great Thomas Chalmers led the majority of the Scottish Church against the control of the establishment and formed the Free Church of Scotland. Chalmers would have the Church free from state control, with the unquestioned right of every congregation to choose its own pastor.

In 1900 the Free Church of Scotland and the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland came together in one organization, the United Free Church of Scotland. They were in happy harmony. Most of the Reformed Presbyterians had already come into the Free Church—all except the "Wee Frees." The united body declared that the civil magistrate should have no authority in spiritual things. They held that the exercise of force in such matters is opposed to the spirit and precepts of christianity, declaring that it was not within the province of the royal magistrate "to legislate as to what is true in religion, to prescribe a creed or form of worship to his subjects, or to endow the church from national resources." He might control temporalities but not spiritualities. No longer should the rights and powers of presbyteries and General Assembly be regulated by acts of the civil power.

These were the principles of the Erskines in 1733, and they are the principles of all Presbyterians today. On these principles of Erskine and Chalmers, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, in 1929, received the United Free Church back into its fold. The Scottish Church was again united and free—"a free church within a free state." But it was not that when the Seceders made good their fight.

We do well to express our filial devotion to the fathers of our church for the stand they took in 1733. On the great issue of church and state—the freedom of the church from state control—we stand where they stood. They fought our battle. Because of their faithfulness and the faithfulness of their followers, the churches of the Presbyterian faith throughout the world now stand together on this common ground.

Here in Bloomington for a hundred years (on this site since 1869) this church has stood. It was founded by men and women of “the old time and religion,” whose ancestors brought their faith to the wilds of America from Scotland and North Ireland. In their pioneer cabin homes they organized their religious “society.” As soon as they could they built their house of worship. It was unfurnished and unadorned, except by their simple unfeigned worship. They were a hardy, sturdy stock who remembered the ways of their fathers and who sought to instill in their children a true piety and worthy standards of conduct. Most of them were not highly educated, but they were never illiterate. They were friends of education and were founders of schools as well as of churches. In days before public schools, or community schools, they taught their children to read from the catechism and the Bible. They were a neighborly people and the community recognized in them a good type of citizenship. It is most fitting that we should celebrate the days of their beginnings, recall their early trials and hardships, and that we should honor their memories by emulating their example in all good works.