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The Reformed Church in the United States

By CHARLES E. SCHAEFFER

Its History, Teachings,
Organization and
Aims

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THE history of the Reformed Church in the United States has been told so frequently that to be writing about it again is like a twice told tale. The Reformed Church had its origin in Switzerland and France and is the direct outcome of the Reformation which took place in 1517. At that time a great movement developed in the Church. Prior to that Christianity consisted of the Roman Catholic and the Greek Catholic Churches; the latter known as the Church of the East and the former as the Church of the West. Many corruptions had crept into these old Churches and, thus urged by many directing forces in the intellectual, social, political and religious world, certain leaders, among them Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli, began to preach what came to be known as Reformation ideas. At first the movement was known simply as the Reformation, and all those who affiliated themselves with it were, in a certain sense, Reformers. In 1529 there was a misunderstanding between the followers of Luther and those of Zwingli on doctrinal grounds, and the Reformation movement divided itself into two main currents; the one following Luther came to be known as the Lutherans, and the other following Zwingli retained the old name Reformed. Now then, this movement spread into the different countries of Europe and wherever it went

the Church was known by the country in which it was being established. Thus, we we came to have the Reformed Church in Holland, the Reformed Church in Germany, the Reformed Church in France, the Reformed Church in Hungary. In England it came to be known as the Church of England. In Scotland the name Presbyterian, after its form of government, was adopted. In Norway, Denmark and Sweden, the Lutheran movement came to prevail, although it was also quite strong in other European countries.

Now, when the emigration to America of Germans, Swiss, French and Dutch started, these people brought their Reformed Church with them into this country. They settled in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia and the Carolinas, and naturally grouped themselves together into congregations and called themselves the Reformed Church in America just as they had been called in their mother countries. We trace the organization of these congregations back to 1725, and thus this year we are celebrating the Two Hundredth Anniversary of the organization of the Reformed Church in the United States. These Churches were scattered far and wide. They were confined principally to the Eastern Atlantic Coast and were comprised of German, Swiss, French and Holland people. The ministers were few in number and had to be imported from Europe. The Reformed Church of Holland chiefly concerned itself about these scattered congregations. In 1747 Michael Schlatter came over from Holland and organized these congregations here into a body known as the Coetus. This gave them some

coherence, while at the same time it bound them into ecclesiastical relationship with the Synod in Holland. Thus, in a sense, the Reformed Church in the United States was for a time a sort of foreign mission station of the Reformed Church in Holland. In 1793 the congregations having grown into sufficient numbers, declared themselves independent of the Church of Holland and organized themselves into what was known as the Synod of the Reformed Church in the United States. That date marks a distinctive epoch in the history of our Church. The language which was used was principally the German language. Here and there were a few congregations that used the English language. Consequently the denomination came to be known as the German Reformed Church. Its official title, however, namely, **THE REFORMED CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES**, was officially adopted in 1869. Still there are those who are not properly informed and who insist on calling it the German Reformed Church. It is wonderful how some things cling to us through the years.

The denomination had no educational institutions, no theological seminaries, no orphanages, no Boards of any kind whatsoever. All these had to be erected. The need for ministers was the primary one, as it has indeed been all through our history. The Theological Seminary was established in 1825, thus this year we are also celebrating the One Hundredth Anniversary of this historic event. The Classes of the Church were organized in 1819. Then the Boards began to be established. A Board of Domestic Missions was erected in 1826. At first there

was only one Synod, but as the work developed other Synods came to be formed, thus we had the mother Synod here in the East, then the Ohio Synod, the Synod of the Northwest, and others followed until to-day we have seven. In the spring of 1863 the Tercentenary of the Heidelberg Catechism was observed with a week of special services in Philadelphia. The historic event led the leaders of the Church to organize the General Synod in November of that year at Pittsburgh. That body, which is the highest ecclesiastical judicatory of the Church, erected various Boards, and took over some that were already in existence, thus there came to be the Board of Home Missions, the Board of Foreign Missions, the Publication and Sunday School Board, the Board of Ministerial Relief, the Board of Christian Education. There also came to be established colleges and academies and orphanages and hospitals and deaconess' homes and old folks' homes, until today the Reformed Church has a membership of 340,000, with 1,757 congregations and 1,317 ministers, raising annually for congregational purposes \$3,546,359, and for benevolence \$1,730,587.

Teachings

The Reformed Church has always been known as **THE CHURCH OF THE WORD**. It believes that the Bible is the only rule of faith. The slogan of the Lutherans was "The just shall live by faith." The slogan of the Reformed was "The Bible is the rule of faith." Its standard of doctrine is known as the **HEIDELBERG CATECHISM**, which was published in 1563. This little book, which some one said was worth its weight

in gold, is divided into three parts, starting with the sinful condition of men, and showing the way of salvation, and then following by an expression of gratitude in word and work for such deliverance. The Reformed Church has also subscribed to the articles of faith known as the Apostles' Creed. It also uses the Nicene Creed in connection with its Communion Service. It profoundly believes that salvation is a gift of God bestowed by His mercy and grace and not a reward of the merit of the individual either through works or otherwise. It believes that salvation comes by grace through faith. It has always held to the doctrine of the Trinity, the Fatherhood of God, the Divine Sonship of Jesus and to the inspiring power of the Holy Spirit. It recognizes two Sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. While it believes in infant baptism, it does not reject the baptism of adults. It believes in sprinkling, but also recognizes the validity of baptism by immersion. The Sacraments, it holds, are signs and seals; outward signs of an invisible reality, and seals confirming a divine act. Thus, the elements of bread and wine in the Lord's Supper are the signs and seals of the spiritual presence of Christ whom the communicant appropriates by faith. The Reformed Church believes in the immortality of the soul and in the life everlasting. It is conservatively liberal and liberally conservative in its doctrinal beliefs. It is not greatly disturbed by present theological discussions, for its emphasis upon Christianity as a life and as an experience overshadows all the differences of the intellectual apprehensions of truth known as doctrine. It has always stood for

an educational type of religion, although it recognizes and emphasizes the importance of a sound and sane evangelism. It believes in what is today known as Social Service, which it interprets to mean the application of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all the relationships of human life. It is one of the most tolerant denominations in the land. It recognizes the good in others and can fall into harmony with certain great movements for Church union and co-operative effort. It profoundly believes that the Gospel of Christ is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth, and thus it engages actively and aggressively in Missionary enterprises at home and abroad and hopes with sister denominations to win the world eventually for Jesus Christ.

Organization

The Reformed Church belongs to the family of Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System. In other words, its organization is the Presbyterian form of government. There are just four types of Church government in Christendom:

1st—The Papal. This comprises the group over which the Pope presides.

2nd—The Episcopal. This comes from a Greek word which means Bishop. It includes the group of Churches which are presided over by a Bishop. We have it in the Protestant Episcopal, the Methodist Episcopal and also in a somewhat modified form in the Evangelical and the United Brethren Churches.

3rd—The Presbyterian. This also comes from a Greek word which means Elder. This comprises the group of Churches that are ruled by representatives elected by the people themselves. It is a form of government which corresponds almost exactly with our American national type of government. All Re-

formed and Presbyterian Churches come under this group.

4th—The Congregational. This means that the congregation is the unit of authority. Each local congregation determines its own policy. The Congregational and the Baptist Churches and the Disciples belong to this group. They have no Synods, but they simply come together in conventions where a somewhat unifying spirit among them is promoted.

Now, the Reformed Church belongs in its organization to this third type of Church government. Its principal bodies, known by the word judicatories, are: the Consistory, the Spiritual Council, the Congregation, the Classis, the Synod, the General Synod.

The Consistory is the governing body of the congregation and consists of the pastor and a certain number of elders and deacons elected by the members themselves.

The Spiritual Council is comprised of the pastor and the elders of the Consistory, and they attend to the more spiritual matters of the congregation.

The Congregation is a group of like-minded individuals who have banded themselves together in fellowship for the purpose of worshipping God in common, of hearing the message of His word, of enjoying the Holy Sacraments, and of unitedly carrying forward the interests of Christ's Kingdom to the ends of the earth. There are 1,757 congregations in the Reformed Church in the United States.

The Classis consists of the ministers and delegated elders within a given area determined by the Synod. There must be at least three ministers, and it must embrace at least three pastoral charges. The Classis deals principally with the affairs in the congregations within its bounds. It also elects its representatives to the General Synod and receives recommendations from the General Synod, which it seeks to carry out in the local congregations or pastoral charges. The Classis reviews the work of the congregations within its bounds. There are 58 Classes in the Reformed Church in the United States.

The Synod is comprised of four or more Classes, as may be designated by the General Synod. The Synod may meet either as a delegated body or in general convention. When it meets as a delegated body its representation is determined by the number of congregations in each of the Classes of which it is composed. When it meets in general convention it is supposed that the pastor and at least one elder from each pastoral charge will be in attendance. The Synod deals principally with educational and benevolent institutions within its own bounds, as also with the subjects of Home and Foreign Missions and with problems which may present themselves. More and more the Synod is becoming an inspirational rather than a legislative body in the Reformed Church. The Synod reviews the work of the Classes. There are 7 Synods in the Reformed Church in the United States.

The General Synod is the highest judicatory of the Church. It is comprised of ministers and elders delegated by the Classes. It is always a delegated body. It meets once every three years. It reviews the proceedings of the Synods, and receives and acts upon such recommendations of the Classes as may be presented to it. It is the court of last appeal and has power to decide any controversy between Synod and Classis which may develop from time to time. Its work is carried forward through Boards and Commissions. There are five Boards in the Church: the Board of Home Missions, the Board of Foreign Missions, the Publication and Sunday School Board, the Board of Ministerial Relief and Sustentation, the Board of Christian Education. It is through these five Boards that the work of the Church is principally carried out. Of course, the District Synods, as well as the Classes and the congregations may have Boards. The educational institutions have Boards of their own, but the five leading Boards of the Church enumerated above are the ones which function under the auspices of the General Synod. The General Synod has also a number of

Commissions and Committees, the principal ones of which are the Forward Movement Commission and the United Missionary and Stewardship Committee.

The various Boards report to the General Synod every three years and lay before that body their budgets for the coming triennium. The General Synod then deliberates over these and finally adopts a certain amount which is then divided up among the Classes, based in part upon the number of members and in part upon their willingness and ability. The Classes then divide this amount among the congregations, and the congregations raise the money through methods of their own and forward the money through the Classical Treasurer to the Treasurers of the respective Boards, where it is properly applied.

The General Synod has no educational or benevolent institutions, except those under the Board of Foreign Missions. The orphanages, the academies, colleges, theological seminaries, hospitals, deaconess homes, old folks' homes, all are under either the District Synod, the Classis, or a group of Synods, a group of Classes, or they may elect their own Board of Trustees.

Aims

The aims of the Reformed Church are expressed in the Preamble of its Constitution, in the following words:

"For the maintenance of truth and order in accordance with the Word of God, the Reformed Church in the United States ordains this Constitution to be its fundamental law for government, doctrine and worship, and declares the same to have binding authority on all its members, congregations and judicatories."

And also in Article 6 of the Constitution which reads as follows:

"It is the duty of Church members to live sober, righteous and godly lives, and to labor faithfully in bringing others to Christ. They shall obey the laws and

rules of life prescribed in the Word of God and abide by the Constitution of the Church, and contribute liberally, in proportion to their means, to the support of the gospel and for the extension of the kingdom of Christ. Every member shall attend faithfully the public services of the Church and shall engage diligently in private devotions; and those who have been confirmed shall partake of the Lord's Supper at least once a year. Parents shall give special attention to the Christian training of the members of their household."

It appears from this that the principal aim of the Reformed Church is to assist other denominations in establishing the Kingdom of God upon the earth. This is the purpose for which practically all Church bodies exist. The Reformed Church has some specific contributions to make in the accomplishment of this common purpose. It is broad-minded and liberal enough in its teachings and in its practice to join with others in working out a common program of evangelism, social service and education. It seeks by the application of the Gospel to bring in the reign of Christ into all the realms and relationships of human life. It wishes in a peculiar sense to carry forward the work which Christ began to do on earth. It wants to make America a Christian nation, and use its wealth of men and money in extending the Kingdom of God to lands beyond the sea so that the whole wide world may be won for Christ, our Redeemer and Lord. The Reformed Church in its history and teachings, in its organization and aims, takes first rank among the Protestant forces of the world. It has had an honored past; it has an interesting and living present, and a promising future.