

Religion in Iowa—The Presbyterians

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Religion in Iowa—The Presbyterians

by CHARLES BLANCHARD

The Presbyterians in their origin derived their theology from John Calvin of Geneva, Switzerland, and John Knox of Scotland, who had long been a resident of Geneva. Knox was to Scotland what Calvin was to the Continent.

The theology of the Presbyterians of the old colonial period in America was modified by Puritanism and by the subtle influences of the spirit of democracy and republicanism. Presbyterians tried to hold to the doctrine of the Almighty, yet they modified their own doctrines and they were always democratic, largely individualistic, and were the "Independents" and "Nonconformists" of England and Scotland. They were among the "fighting saints" of the days of struggle for religious and political liberty and were the Roundheads of the age of Cromwell.

The four great Johns of the Reformation and pre-reformation period were John Wycliffe, England; John Huss, Bohemia; John Calvin, Geneva, and John Knox, Scotland. John Wycliffe, by his translation of the Bible into English almost 200 years before Martin Luther gave the Bible to the German people, became thereby the real father of the Reformation. Wycliffe and Huss were the forerunners of the Reformation under Luther by 150 years. It is evident, therefore, that John Wycliffe was "the morning star of the Reformation." It was he who largely shaped the career and teachings of John Huss at Prague, and it was through their writings that the universities of Central Europe, and Cambridge and Oxford in England, became the seed-beds of reformation on the Continent and the British Isles.

Their influence largely shaped the whole subsequent history

of the English-speaking people. The Wycliffe Bible formed the background for the Authorized, or King James edition of the English Bible issued in 1611—the Bible of Shakespeare and Milton and of the Presbyterians and Puritans of Old England and of New England.

The state church grew up on the Continent and in England with the fall of the papal power. The state church, even more than the Catholic church, by the very nature of its organization and support, was a political institution. The Reformation was as much political as religious. While the Reformation brought a measure of religious liberty in bringing in the state church, it promised to bind upon the people a form of slavery that was even more obnoxious than that from which they had sought to escape. Hence, Puritanism arose as did the Non-conformists and the Independents. The latter were so called because they refused to conform to the established church, the state church. The whole struggle was really a contest between democracy and autocracy—the people against popes, kings, princes, prelates and priests. "No Popery" and "Non-conformity" were part and parcel of the Puritan movement.

Bancroft, the American historian, said of Calvinism, "Calvinism overthrew priestcraft and recognized no other abiding distinctions; opposed secretly, but surely, hereditary monarchy, aristocracy and bondage. Massachusetts owned no king but the King of heaven; no aristocracy but the redeemed; and no bondage but the hopeless, infinite and eternal bondage of sin. Calvinism invoked intelligence against Satan, the great enemy of the human race; and the farmers and seamen of Massachusetts nourished its college with corn and strings of wampum, and in every village built the free school. Thus had the principles of freedom of mind, first asserted for the common people under a religious form by Wycliffe, been pursued, until at last it reached a perfect development, coinciding with the highest attainments of European philosophy."

The first Presbyterian church in Iowa was planted at West Point, Lee county, by Rev. Samuel Wilson and Rev. Launcelot G. Bell, June 24, 1837. The next was at Round Prairie, Des Moines county, now Kossuth, August 14, 1839, with 13 members. Mt. Pleasant, Burlington, Fort Madison, Iowa City, Spring Creek and Rockingham were organized in 1840. All of

these were "Old School" churches. The division over what some regarded as heretical teachings of Dr. Albert Barnes, the great commentator, occurred in 1838, resulted in the formation of "New School" churches.

Dr. Barnes contended for the "free moral agency of man" and that "election to eternal life is founded on faith and obedience." He denied also the implications of the doctrine of "original sin," or the "sin of Adam" imputed to his descendants, declaring it to have no foundation in the Word of God and to be both unjust and absurd. This amounted to a practical denial of what had long been regarded as the fundamental faith of all Calvinists. It was a transition period for both Presbyterians and Congregationalists, most of the latter having held the forms of Calvinism, modified by the growing spirit of charity and liberty. It affected all religious bodies.

The first Iowa Presbytery, composed of the nine churches named above, was formed November 6, 1840 at Muscatine. The first synod was created by the general assembly in 1852, composed of three presbyteries, Iowa, Cedar and Des Moines, and met at Muscatine October 14, 1852. Launcelot G. Bell, who had preached the opening sermon of the first presbytery in 1840, was the moderator of this first synod. Seven ministers were present from the Iowa presbytery, 11 from Cedar presbytery and seven from Des Moines presbytery. There were 12 elders present.

The first New School church was organized at Fort Madison in 1838, by Rev. James A. Clark, missionary of the American Home Missionary Society, who was jointly supported by the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists. Indeed, there was practically no difference between the Congregationalists and the New School Presbyterians save the form of government by presbyteries and synods instead of assemblies. Some of the churches formed by the missionaries of the American Christian Missionary Society were Congregational and some Presbyterian, depending on the tendencies of the missionary or the choice of the members.

A New School Presbyterian church was organized November 25, 1838, in Burlington, which became a Congregational church in 1843, and enjoyed the lifelong ministry of Dr. William Salter. The New School churches multiplied rapidly in

Iowa and there seems to have been considerable rivalry between the two schools, until 1870 when they were reunited. Two synods were organized, Iowa North and Iowa South, with the dividing line along the south line of Clinton, Jones, Greene, Carroll, Crawford and Monona counties. The general assembly in 1882 made state lines the boundaries of synods, and thus the Synod of Iowa was formed, October 19, 1882.

The Story of Iowa by William Justin Harsha gives something of the history of the early Presbyterians and of the pioneer conditions prevailing. Harsha speaks of "capturing a western state for Christ" and growing a commonwealth of many thousands of square miles," and says truly: "What that state is to be in the future councils of the nation depends largely upon the first home missionaries that are sent into her borders." Illustrating the influences of these early missionaries he said, "Across some of our western wheat fields and meadows runs a peculiar gully, deep and long and straight. No shower can wash it out, no crop can hide it. It is an old Indian trail. The braves once went along it to council. The young men and maidens strolled this way in their loves. It is a trace of old things and a touch of a past civilization that will never be wiped out. In the same way there are footsteps of humble missionaries in these western states which no future revival or harvest of souls can obliterate. Eloquence and popularity and high station will not cover them from sight. They belong to the nation, to the church; and they should be retraced in thought by those who love to know what the zeal of faith has done."

The rivalries between the Old and New Schools find humorous and ridiculous illustration in the incident of the two churches in Burlington, of which Ephraim Adams tells in *The Iowa Band*. They both held their services in the Old Zion Methodist Church. Mr. Adams tells of sitting in the pulpit with the New School pastor, and as they looked across to the other end of the building they could see the Old School minister at his desk. The pastor, with a saving sense of humor of a rather grim sort, whispered to him, "Now—now the watchmen see eye to eye!" This church became a Congregational church, as it was in fact in everything but name.

Still another brief but valuable contribution to the early

history of the Presbyterian church in Iowa is Rev. John M. McElroy's *The Men of the Past*, in which he gives a short resume of the church history from 1840 to 1905. "Iowa Presbytery was organized in 1840 with four members. It was connected with the Synod of Illinois and its wide domain extended to the British possessions on the north and to the Rocky Mountains on the west. Thirty years later, at the reunion of the two schools in 1870, the number of Old School ministers within the bounds of the presbytery had reached 83, the New School 35, which with four from the Free Presbyterian church, Kossuth, made a total of 122 in the Synod of Iowa." In 1905, when he wrote, the men on duty since the reunion numbered 175, giving a grand total of almost 300 during the period 1840 to 1905. That these men were of the rugged type is indicated by the fact that the average of 85 who had served the Presbyterian churches in Iowa up to 1905, was 67½ years—leaving out ten who died young—the average age would have been 71. Of the surviving ministers, 20 were on the retired list—one of them above 90; four above 80 and the average was 74. Three died above 90, 12 between 80 and 90. They were not weaklings—physically, mentally or morally. They were fighters—they had to fight—foes within and foes without.

They were educated men. "Twenty or more attended Princeton Theological Seminary, sitting at the feet of Archibald Alexander, Charles Hodge and Addison Alexander and their successors. Thirty or more graduated from the Western Theological Seminary, Allegheny, Pennsylvania, taught by Jacobus, McGill, Plumer and their successors. Others studied at New Albany and at Danville, Kentucky, and among the younger a large number at McCormick Seminary, under Doctor Craig and associates. They would compare in intellect and ability and personal character favorably with a like number of ministers in other localities, east or west. They did not go to the frontier because there was no call or inducement to go elsewhere. They went because of the need."

The heroism of the women who became the wives of home missionaries and pioneer preachers has never been fitly recognized. To them is due a monument that might remind us in these softer days of what these maidens and "Mothers in Is-

rael" denied themselves and endured of hardships and of trials, beyond our realizing.

The pioneer Presbyterian preacher in Iowa was Lancelot Graham Bell, born in Augusta county, Virginia, June 17, 1789; a soldier in the War of 1812; not a college man but a teacher; licensed to preach in 1825. He came to Iowa in a covered wagon in 1836 and located at Burlington. He gave 32 years to the Presbyterian church in this state; organized 28 churches, three presbyteries and one synod, and established two female seminaries. He was called the explorer and leader in Presbyterian missionary work in Iowa. Before there was any Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad across Iowa, Father Bell had made a survey and driven stakes right over that same route and practically "pre-empted" every county seat from Burlington to Creston, and also Clarinda, Sidney and Council Bluffs. He was a true Presbyterian circuit rider, and his work rivaled that of Peter Cartwright among the Methodists and that of Julius A. Reed among the Congregationalists. He had the faith and fortitude of the old Virginia pioneers who treked the trail through Cumberland Gap and settled Tennessee, Kentucky, southern Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Iowa.

The story of Michael Hummer, who was moderator of the first presbytery and a co-worker with Lancelot G. Bell in the early days, is one of the most interesting in the annuals of that period. He was eccentric and evidently something of a scrapper. While he was preaching at Iowa City, the church got behind with his salary and tried to get rid of him but couldn't. Finally he removed to Keokuk, and the church still owing him, he undertook to get even by removing the bell from the steeple of the Iowa City church—a bell that he had been largely instrumental in securing. With Doctor Margrave of Keokuk to help him, he drove up to Iowa City and climbed up in the tower to get the bell. When ready to lower it, Doctor Margrave went to get the team and wagon, and while he was gone some people who had been watching slipped up and removed the ladder. Meanwhile a crowd had gathered to enjoy the fun. Someone loaded the bell in a wagon and took and sunk it in the creek, where it remained for some months. As tradition says, it was mysteriously removed and

somehow transported to Salt Lake City and fell into the hands of Brigham Young. It seems never to have been used.

Hummer, it appears, left the presbytery but continued to preach. He went off into Spiritualism and undertook to build a spiritualist temple at Keokuk, for which he desired the bell. The *Keokuk Des Moines Valley Whig* of that period (1851-2) has a good deal to say about Hummer and his "spiritualistic rappings" and the near tragedies that resulted.

Gamaliel Carter Beaman was the son of Captain David Beaman, the son of a Revolutionary soldier, who lost his life in the Revolution. His early ministry was in Ohio. He became a member of the Des Moines Presbytery October 10, 1846, and spent 44 years in the ministry in the two states. He preached between four and five thousand sermons; organized eight Presbyterian churches and 24 Sunday Schools; lectured on slavery and temperance 474 times, for which he was mobbed 16 times; taught day school and was principal of an academy for five years, with an attendance of from 60 to 100 students; organized temperance societies—Washingtonian, Good Templars and Union Leagues; obtained over 2,700 signatures to antislavery, antiliquor and antitobacco pledges; sold and gave away over 70,000 pages of religious, antislavery and temperance tracts and books; purchased two saloons—converting one in to a dwelling in which he lived; sold the other, investing part of the price in a watch so he could tell how long to preach; lectured on Mormonism as it existed at Nauvoo in 1846, and on Pantheism as taught by Abner Kneeland of Salubria, Van Buren county, Iowa. He required every person he received into the church to assent to the temperance pledge! The man and minister who did these things was not a mollycoddle, not a perfumed preacher, but a pioneer preacher, teacher, lecturer, leader and a reformer.

What William Justin Harsha, in *The Story of Iowa*, calls "frontierism" was the most stubborn enemy the pioneer preacher had to meet. "By this we may characterize that pervading influence of a new country—not mere roughness or uncouthness or unfriendliness. Very often it took on an appearance of excessive friendliness and sympathy. In a new town everybody wants a new church. It will be a good thing for the town. Businessmen contribute to the erection, as a real

estate speculation. The first ice-cream festivals and oyster suppers are well patronized out of a spirit of local pride and general western sociability. The minister may find the building crowded on the Lord's day, because there is nothing else going on in town, but when he comes to cement the organization, and ordain officers and prepare for aggressive, spiritual work, he finds that he is dealing with a veritable Cave of Adullam! His utmost tact and address are necessary to steer between the necessity of doing the Lord's work and the need of so manipulating the town's people as to get support for himself and family. If the minister is a social force in the East he is much more so in the West; and the society in which his powers are exercised far more heterogeneous and distracting."

Samuel Storrs Howe was one of the most prominent men in the state in the pioneer era. He was the corresponding secretary of the State Historical Society for many years and the first editor of the *Annals of Iowa*. He was related to the famous English family, one of whose ancestors built the Howe Inn at Subdury, Massachusetts, with the sign of the "Red Horse," celebrated by Longfellow in his *Tales of a Wayside Inn*. He was the grandson of Captain John Howe of the Revolutionary army. He came to Iowa City in June, 1849, becoming pastor of the historic "Old Stone Church," then but partly completed. It was in this building that the State Historical Society was later housed, from 1868 to 1882. He also interested himself in public education, being editor and proprietor of the *Literary Advertiser and Public School Advocate*, the pioneer educational journal of that early time. In the *Annals of Iowa*, Vol. II, January, 1883, is an article, "Historical Recollections of the First Presbytery of Iowa," being part of an address delivered by him at the Central Presbyterian Church, Des Moines, October 19, 1882. Mr. Howe was the convenor of the state synod in 1852, and the last survivor of the eight ministers who, with their wives and children, crossed the Mississippi to found Presbyterian churches in Iowa. These pioneer Presbyterian preachers include: William W. Woods, William H. Williams, Gamaliel C. Beaman, Thompson Bird, Thompson Bell, Lancelot G. Bell, Williston Jones, John C. Ewing, Father Cowles, Rev. E. Meade, James D. Mason and Dr. Glen Wood.

That the Presbyterians suffered tremendously from the "moving age" is shown in the report of T. S. Bailey, the synodical missionary of Iowa for the year 1883. "The churches were seriously affected by this desire of the people to go into all the world—particularly to the Elysian fields where gold grows, ready coined, on bushes, and roast pigs and turkeys, all ready for the table, run wild!" As a result of this exodus to the West—Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, California, Washington and Oregon—many Presbyterian churches were almost depleted of their membership. Of the 355 churches in Iowa, 90 were reported vacant and 30 more with a merely nominal existence. More than one half of the 355 were sustained in part by the National Mission Board at an expense of about \$20,000, less than half this amount being contributed by Presbyterian churches of Iowa.

That it was a transition period in the Presbyterian church is indicated in the report on "The State of the Church": "While the modern Paul is thundering, the modern Felix yawns! For the most part there is mournful evidence that the church is not acting in any commanding sense on the aggressive, but rather that she is measurably satisfied with the defensive. She has thrown up her works and is fighting from behind the battlements. Upon the other hand there is a spirit of hopefulness of desire, of expectation, and the consciousness of latent power."

The depressing slowness of growth in the living membership of the church at the time is thus: There were 20,812 on the roll in 1881; in 1882 there were 20,931; for 1883 there was a gain of only 13. Only 132 net gain in two years, this, of course, was chiefly due to the western emigration and the transition period through which the Presbyterian church was passing during the decade of 1880 to 1890. The old-time missionary went out about this time and there was no one to take his place! The influences of the Moody and Sankey evangelism had waned and Billy Sunday had not yet appeared.

The year 1887 was Presbyterian Jubilee year in Iowa. Rev. David S. Tappan, D.D., prepared a *History of Presbyterianism in Iowa*, which is published in the *Minutes* for that year, pp. 77-87, in which he repeats the summary of early events. Also in the *Minutes* for this year will be found a list of the places

of meeting of the Synods, Old and New, with names of moderators, from 1852 to 1887. A statistical summary of the growth of the church from 1855 to 1887 gives 116 churches, 78 ministers, and 3,753 communicants in 1855. In 1870 there were 276 churches, 188 ministers and 13,878 communicants. In 1887 there were 352 churches, 264 ministers and 24,713 communicants. The number of pupils in Sunday Schools increased from 13,574 in 1870 to 29,814 in 1887—a decidedly healthy growth in the Sunday School work and a steady but not rapid growth of church membership. The benevolences grew from \$17,186 in 1870 to \$49,948 in 1887; for general association and congregational purposes from \$189,696 in 1870 to \$272,018 in 1887.

The question of establishing an educational institution came up in the meeting of the first Synod in 1852, Old School, and among the New School in 1853. The zeal of the pioneer Presbyterians, like that of other churches, ran away with their judgment—resulting in the effort to establish Des Moines College, Yellow Springs College, Lyons Female College and Alexander College. All of these ultimately failed. Other schools of academic character were Corning Academy and Fort Dodge Collegiate Institute. This last finally became a fixture at Storm Lake. Lenox College at Hopkinton, Parsons College at Fairfield, and Coe College at Cedar Rapids fared better. The German Theological School of the Northwest at Dubuque, under the direction and care of the general assembly, was another institution that owed much to the Presbyterians of Iowa. On the whole the record of the Presbyterian church in educational matters is one of which they may well be proud. Parsons and Coe have made excellent progress and are among the best small colleges in the state.

A remarkable revival occurred at Lenox College in the winter of 1887-8, under the direction of an evangelist assisted by Doctors Ritchey and Bollman and other teachers, in which 170 conversions were reported, about 80 of whom were students at Lenox. This college was noted for its spirit of revival, due largely to the zeal and consecrated devotion of the teachers and the influence of the Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Associations. Of the 138 graduates sent out from 1866 to 1888, 45 were teachers, professors and superintendent of schools; 10 were ministers; 15 were lawyers; and 4 were

physicians. The record presented in the alumni roll is one of which Lenox has no reason to be ashamed. Yet Lenox with such a record of service rendered to the church and commonwealth suffered the fate of many other of our smaller institutions.

The Synod of Iowa, formed in 1882, in 1891 consisted of nine presbyteries, with 374 churches, 288 ministers, 1,188 elders and 299 deacons, with 30,174 members. The Sunday School membership was 34,354. The number added during the year ending April 1, 1891, upon examination was 2,610; upon certificate, 1,569; adult baptisms, 1,110; infants, 977; contributed to benevolences, \$63,221; General Assembly, \$3,044.59; congregational, \$315,500; miscellaneous, \$10,988—total of \$392,752.73. The Minutes of 1892 show an increase of 25 churches in the decade from 1881-91; of membership from 25,756 to 35,366—a gain of 9,610. A total of 106 young people's organizations was reported with offerings of \$7,236.06. Twelve young women had been sent out by the Women's Synodical Missionary Society of Iowa—three each to China and India, four to Persia, two to Mexico, with another under appointment.

Superintendent T. S. Bailey's report of his ten years' service, 1881-1891, shows that 87 churches were organized and 62 had been abandoned during that period. Of the ministers regularly employed when he became superintendent, only 13 occupied precisely the same field, and only 85 of the 243 in 1881 still remained in the state. Commenting on this shifting of ministers, Superintendent Bailey says: "Is it not remarkable what an energetic set of men we Presbyterian ministers are? We move!" This was due to "the false standards of measurements among the churches, the lack of pastoral gifts, rather than lack of pulpit ability among the preachers; but chiefly, perhaps, to the meager salaries which compelled the secretary to seek men of small families, or with no family, who could easily move—and so they moved!" Thus, he adds: "The neglect of the rural and village churches killed the goose that laid the golden egg!" This has its counterpart in practically every Protestant religious body in the United States. It is a serious problem that confronts Protestantism today.

The Presbyterian church of Iowa has a claim upon Billy Sunday, who frankly owned that he was a Presbyterian be-

cause his wife was! "Ma" Sunday was evidently a deciding factor in many ways in the remarkable career of the noted evangelist. It was a far fetch from the staid, serious, solemn, sanctimonious Presbyterian preacher of the colonial, or the pioneer period here in Iowa, to the irrepressible, unexampled, exuberant, exhaustless ex-athlete! Billy Sunday brought a new impulse into the Presbyterian church and into all the great Protestant orders. He turned things topsy-turvy and broke most of the regulation rules of the ministry and of classical Anglo-Saxon language, but he stirred multitudes of sluggish souls. In spite of all the critics, Billy Sunday will always be remembered as one of the greatest evangelists of the twentieth century.

The "Iowa Movement" for home missions had its inception under the inspiring leadership of Sheldon Jackson, who, with a number of other Presbyterian preachers, met in a prayer meeting on Prospect Hill, overlooking the Missouri river near Sioux City, April 29, 1869. In 1905 Doctor Jackson delivered a very remarkable address at the meeting of the Synod of Iowa in Cedar Rapids, in which he reviewed the history of 37 years, 1869-1905: "In that epoch-making, pioneer period, the state of Iowa stood at the fore. Her whole history has been a series of wonderful opportunities well improved. The first free state carved from the Louisiana Purchase, she attracted to her borders a large immigration of energetic, cultured Christian people, who turned the wilderness practically into fruitful fields and happy homes, built manufactories, cities and railways, established churches, schools and colleges, and rivaled early New England in the creation of the best type of American citizenship represented by such men as George W. Jones, territorial delegate to Congress; Governor Grimes, Governor Hempstead, Lucas, Grinnell, Cummins, T. S. Parvin, A. C. Dodge, Secretary Kirkwood, Senators Allison and DOLLIVER, Congressman Lacey, Secretary Shaw, and a host of others in the public service.

The story of the work of Dr. Sheldon Jackson reads like a romance. Growing out of this Iowa Movement, from 1869 to 1905, in the following states and territories—western Iowa, Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, southern Idaho, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico and Alaska have been organized

5 synods, 27 presbyteries, 579 churches, with 69,601 members. Into these churches 100,601 have been received on confession of faith and their contributions for missionary and benevolent and other religious purposes reach the sum of \$15,323,392. But more than all, The Iowa Movement gave impetus to the marvelous career of Dr. Sheldon Jackson—perhaps the most remarkable missionary that America ever produced, the bare record of whose journeys and toils and triumphs must forever thrill the hearts of all who love the heroic, the self-sacrificial, the unconquerable. He was styled the “little bronzed missionary”—a man of weak eyes, insignificant bodily presence; but a man in whom apostolic zeal of ancient times found expression in the New World.

At the semicentennial of the planting of Presbyterianism in Iowa, Rev. E. R. Burkhalter, D.D., said: “Our population is mostly rural, thinly scattered over our large acreage. Of our 352 churches, by far the most are very weak in membership and wealth. The future of Presbyterianism in Iowa largely depends on what is done with these weaker churches. Shall our church withdraw from them and leave them to perish, while it concentrates on the more favored points? If it takes this course it can never regain the lost ground. Nor dare we say that any other branch of the Church of Christ is better able than we to come in and occupy the field. The true course is a richer, deeper cultivation of our whole territory.”

Rev. J. H. Aughey presented a paper at the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the First Presbyterian Church at Chariton, Iowa, on “The Church of Tomorrow” in which he prophesied: “The church of tomorrow will be radically different from the church of today. There are fifteen sects of the Presbyterians in the United States. They all differ because of diversities of views concerning nonessentials. The Methodists and Baptists are as fragmentary as the Presbyterians. Tomorrow, which means in the near future, the Methodist church will be a unit and the diverse Baptist organizations will be united. Tomorrow there will be a federation of all the orthodox churches of the whole country.”

The figures in the above article may have changed considerably since it was written.

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