

Divided Heritage Book Review

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Divided Heritage: The Presbyterian Contribution to the United Church of Canada goes into great detail of the early years of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. I approached the book with my primary interest being that of the subtitle: what parts of the Presbyterian Church were integrated into the United Church? On this point, I did feel as though the subtitle was a bit of a misnomer, as very little of the book deals with anything after the union in 1925. Instead, the book is primarily about aspects of Presbyterianism prior to union, with one chapter about the union process and nothing about after the union. My primary task of interest as I continued to read, then, was to extrapolate what is described in the book with what I knew of the early United Church. In conclusion, there are undoubtedly many aspects of the United Church which did derive from Presbyterianism, but it was still surprising how little those connections were explicitly made, considering the subtitle.

In the opening chapter, author John Webster Grant details his own Presbyterian heritage. This helps to establish his bias throughout the rest of the book as well as to give a more personal tone to the rest of the book. Growing up in Nova Scotia in a very Presbyterian town, some that joined the United Church and some that didn't, he is quite familiar with the nature of Presbyterianism in Canada. He attended a United Church that was previously Presbyterian and admits his bias freely that he has always been on the pro-union side of the debate which splintered the denomination. Since so little of the book dealt with union or anything after it, I found this disclaimer of his bias almost irrelevant since I never really detected it throughout the rest of the book.

Origins

The following chapter proceeds through a background of Canadian Presbyterianism, moving all the way from Huldreich Zwingli and John Calvin to the beginnings of Presbyterianism in Canada. The basic Reformation history was very familiar to me. Zwingli would be the first to structure his church essentially as Presbyterians later would. As Grant points out, Zwingli is very important to the Reformation in general and yet is hardly known by anybody even within his Reformed tradition. As he puts it, somebody from the United or Presbyterian churches now would "find more in him that would be familiar than in either Luther or Calvin" (33): the memorial understanding of communion, the minister facing the congregation in lay clothes, and simple churches.

Many of Zwingli's reforms were picked up by other reformers including, most famously, John Calvin. Most importantly, Calvin's large body of theological writings such as his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* continue to shape many denominations, including the Presbyterian Church and the United Church of Canada. Doctrine was very important to Calvin and this would be continued by those traditions following him. Furthermore, this doctrine for Calvin was not necessarily what he found the easiest, but what he understood as being the message of the Bible as the central authority for his doctrine. This Scriptural emphasis would continue through the Presbyterian Church as well.

This movement would then translate from Switzerland to many other places, including Scotland. John Knox was the key figure in this movement, establishing in what would become known as the Presbyterian Church. Known more for what he opposed than what he taught and for being even harsher than Calvin, Knox orchestrated major religious changes in Scotland in opposition to Roman Catholic Queen Mary. His successor, Andrew Melville, would continue the work and is particularly notable for establishing the factor that gives Presbyterianism its name: the elder-board or presbytery form of governance.

From here, the history of Presbyterianism begins to get much more convoluted. As with Protestantism in general, the Presbyterian Church began to split into a variety of factions: Moderate, Evangelical, Burgher, Antiburgher, Kirk, Free Church, and probably more. I honestly lost track almost immediately of which groups divided over which issues and it was a point of confusion that stayed with me throughout the whole book.

Word

As mentioned above in the historical introduction, there is a huge emphasis within the Reformed tradition on Scripture and on doctrine as understood through their interpretations of Scripture. Grant puts it this way: "the feature of Presbyterianism that might well stand out most prominently is the importance it attaches to words" (58). Still in practice in many churches of the Reformed tradition today is the act of bringing in a large Bible at the beginning of the worship service. The sermon may be shorter than in some other traditions but it was always the centre of the service. Prayers would take as long as the sermon "and might not be too easily distinguished from it" (58). These worship elements will be discussed more in a later section.

The theological system inherited from Calvin and defined in the *Shorter Catechism* has remained a key feature of Presbyterianism as well, although in recent years it has been less of an emphasis within

the United Church of Canada. As important of defining features as the forms of worship and style of church governance are, it was always secondary to doctrine. Many aspects of this doctrine are hard to accept for the contemporary mind – even as Calvin acknowledged to some extent in admitting that his doctrine was what he saw in Scripture, not what was friendly. I’m sure this is part of the reason why doctrine is considered less significant in most Canadian Presbyterian and United Churches today. While many still hold to the doctrines in theory, the emphasis on them has faded away.

Worship

Worship is another central feature of Presbyterianism because worship is understood to be the whole life of the Christian. Worship is not restricted to the Sunday morning communal gathering, which is how we typically use the word today. The *Shorter Catechism* starts off with the question of the chief end of humanity and responds with “to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever” (81) – in other words, to worship.

As a denomination that heavily emphasizes preaching, the Presbyterian importance of sacraments is often under-estimated. To add to the misconception, contrary to many Lutheran and Catholic assumptions, the Reformed memorialist understanding of the Lord’s Supper actually maintains a central importance of the sacrament. By speaking of the “spiritual presence,” Calvin did not mean to emphasize a “real absence.” This was contrary to the Lutheran and Catholic understandings but still incredibly important. The sacrament gained its value not inherently or through a physical change, but because of the faith of those participating. It was a distinctly personal event, in line with much of the emphasis given to a personal decision (and/or elected calling) of faith which is so prominent in evangelicalism today. This emphasis has generally been lost within the United Church of Canada in its emphasis to include everyone. Baptism was given less emphasis, even taking place in homes in early Presbyterianism. Like the Lord’s Supper, it was taken very seriously. While it is not a remission of Original Sin, it is a welcoming into the visible church and an assurance that God has offered salvation to the elect.

Preaching as the central feature of worship was understood to be a mediation of the Word of God to the congregation. It was not an intellectual exercise or an artistic presentation – the intellectualization and the artistic skills are only tools for conveying the Word. Prayers would also be very important, almost as long as the sermon in most cases.

Ministry

As the next chapter discusses ministry, the major point of emphasis is on the priesthood of all believers. While certain ordained individuals are given specific roles of leadership as determined by their calling, all are equally ministers in some sense. This is the theological rationale behind the presbytery system: since leadership ability is determined by life experience and spiritual maturity rather than any special calling, anybody with that maturity can make decisions and not just clergy. This creates the tension present to various extents in all Protestants: while we claim that all Christians are ministers and priests in some sense, we also have clearly defined special roles including “the minister” - by which we mean the full-time paid pastor. Still, Presbyterians gave (and give) much more decision-making rights to the laity than episcopal-governed churches did (and do).

There were initially many theological colleges set up by the various branches of Presbyterianism in Canada because they all had the same emphasis on education but also had differing interpretations. After completing the schooling, the candidate for ministry would be either chosen or rejected by the local presbytery. Over time, the emphasis on being given a specific calling by God was gradually replaced by simply having the desire to serve. This desire-to-serve requirement tends to be much closer to what is the case in the United Church of Canada today.

A very brief three pages at the end of the chapter are given to the development of women in leadership. In Presbyterianism, this change took longer than some other denominations because of the lack of precedent which was very important to Presbyterians. Calvin was clear in his opposition to women leading a congregation, and so leadership had remained consistently all-male ever since. Patriarchy was deeply ingrained. I found this a little strange as it is clearly a feature that did not transfer over to the United Church of Canada which is now well-known for most having an emphasis on female leadership while some other denominations still do not allow for this gender equality.

Organization

The polity structure of the Presbyterian Church was not simply seen as effective but also as divinely ordained. “Its principles of governing, as described by the American theologian A.A. Hodge, were the parity of clergy, the participation of the people in the government of the church, and the subdivision of the church into smaller units” (141). While the details of putting these principles into practice did vary at times, ever since the early Scottish merger of Reformed theology and Presbyterian

government, they have been held together. The Presbytery was given the bulk of the decision-making ability and it has held that position even after union into the United Church of Canada.

Outreach

The next chapter begins by identifying three major periods of revival in Presbyterianism. The first was the Reformation era with a concentration on religious-political interaction. In the second was a shift to conventicles. I was curious about this era, but since the text deals with a later period, it only is given a brief mention. Of more interest to this book is the era of the Great Awakenings throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, which were characterized by a drive for evangelism to draw more into Christian fellowship. I was vaguely familiar with the revival in the United States and more familiar with John Wesley's work in England, yet I knew very little about what was going on in Canada. While differing in the details, the book portrays the Canadian revival as being similar in these emphases of piety and evangelism.

As I've pointed out in the forums for this course, "evangelism" is now seen as almost a dirty word in the United Church of Canada, and "outreach" is usually used to mean social action with no specific call to join Christianity. As Grant puts it:

Nowadays, a great many people, especially although not only younger people, have great difficulty in understanding why anyone would desire the conversion of the heathen, let alone commit his or her life to furthering it... And yet for many years this was the call that represented the very acme of Christian commitment, and those who answered it were the acknowledged heroes and heroines of the faith (178-179).

From what we've studied in the class, I know that this evangelistic zeal did remain in the earlier years of the United Church, but quickly faded away in the 60's and 70's.

Church Union

The multiple Presbyterian factions first merged together into one Presbyterian Church in Canada and then not long later were faced with the opportunity for another church union. Ironically, this second attempt at union instead resulted in a division. Canadian Presbyterianism would return to being more than one denominational body, now with half folded into the new United Church of Canada and half remaining as a separate organization.

The United Church of Canada would be structured largely as a merger of the Presbyterian Church and the Methodist Church. The Basis of Union was completed fairly quickly, with little doctrinal

debate other than a central issue of free will (the Methodist viewpoint) or predestination (the Presbyterian viewpoint). Over this along with some administrative issues, the Presbyterian Church went through a tough period including a “pamphlet war” of the two sides of the union debate promoting their cause. Those in favour of union did offer some concessions but it was not enough and ultimately the two sides went their separate ways.

Conclusion

In short, this book went into a lot of detail - sometimes what seemed to me like an excessive degree of detail. It often came across redundant, but one thing that cannot be denied is that by the end, the reader will definitely get a good sense of the state of Presbyterianism in Canada at this time. As I mentioned in the introduction, I feel like it failed to deliver on the statement of the subtitle as it rarely talked directly about how these things within Presbyterianism became contributions to the United Church. I was able to piece together the connections as I have throughout this report with what I know from the rest of this course on United Church history. Some things have clearly carried forward: many of the forms of worship and the strong presbyterian polity to name the largest two. Others carried forward for the early stages of the United Church but have been lost since, such as the strong passion for evangelism. Others seem to have never made the transition to the United Church at all, such as the emphasis on a fairly-precise doctrine which from Union has been somewhat set aside in order to create a more inclusive organization.

Bibliography

Grant, John Webster. *Divided Heritage: The Presbyterian Contribution to the United Church of Canada*. Yorkton, SK: Laverdure & Associates, 2007.