

# The Scottish Reformation and Modern Missions

## D. Douglas Gebbie\*

\* *D. Douglas Gebbie is a regular reviewer for this journal. He is a native of Scotland and was educated at Glasgow College of Technology and the Free Church of Scotland College, Edinburgh. He serves the Presbyterian Reformed Church in Chesley, Ontario.*



It is said that John Knox prayed, “Give me Scotland, or I die.” In 1560, God gave him Scotland. The purpose of this submission is to examine what he and his colleagues did with her and initiate a discussion on what lessons we might learn for today.

To achieve our purpose, we shall first examine the mission strategy which Knox and his colleagues set out in *The First Book of Discipline*.

Second, we shall examine what the Reformers sought to do in the light of Presbyterian principles. Now, the object of our scrutiny is the Reformation in Scotland, and that, in fairness, requires a Scottish approach. We are not looking at Knox and company’s mission strategy for precedents which we might apply analogously to the pattern of English Common Law, but for principles which we might reapply in each situation while being informed by examples of previous applications.

Third, we shall describe how the principles and practices of the Scottish Reformation might be reapplied in mission situations today. As we have said, this is a discussion. This third section will not be a list of modern mission solutions but of resource maximizing suggestions. This will not require thinking outside of the box: our commitment to Scripture forbids that. This will involve rethinking our perception of the box’s dimensions and utilizing the extra space.

### **A. *The First Book of Discipline*: a Manifesto for Mission**

In *The First Book of Discipline* (*FBD*), Knox and five other ministers, all named John, described the church which they intended to plant in Scotland and, also, how they intended to plant it. They knew that their goals could not be achieved overnight; so, the *FBD* contains both a manifesto and a road map. The actual history of what they and their successors were able to accomplish and how long it took is complicated by shifts in government policy. That part of the narrative does not concern us here other than to note that the Reformers’ achievements were made in the face of many setbacks and with limited financial resources. Our focus is on the plan.

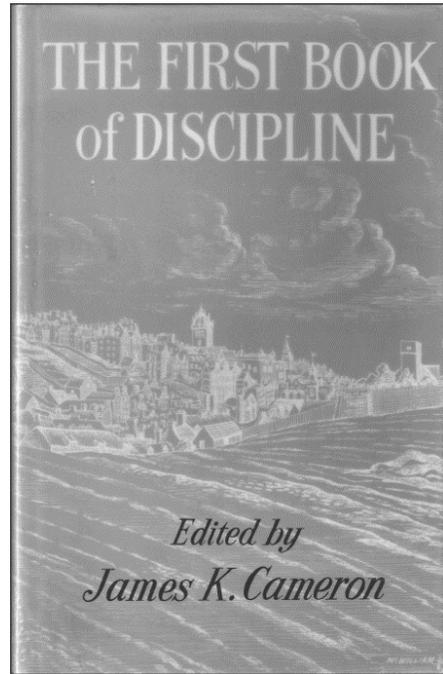
The Reformers' starting point was that the Church of Scotland would have the marks of a true evangelical church: Word, Sacraments, and Discipline. To that end, the *FBD* sets forth the aim and method of having an educated and lawfully ordained minister of the Word in every parish. It describes the discipline of the church both in terms of polity (ruling elders, deacons, and councils) and of remedial censure. It even suggests how the whole might be financed.

The Reformers recognised, of course, that it would take time before their plan could come to fruition. Faced with the interim, they proposed some temporary measures. There were church buildings and congregations meeting in them; however, there were not enough ministers to fill all the pulpits. To meet this situation, rather than have the ministers at hand settled in a small number of parishes, they were to be spread over the country. Some were to be placed in the most influential centres of population: the places to which people came for government, education, and commerce. Others were to go out to the people; they were to be placed as "superintendents" over a number of vacant congregations. Until these congregations had their own minister, they were to be supplied by visits from the superintendent and, in his absence, by "readers" or "exhorters". In order to develop the gifts of these readers and exhorters, there was to be the on-the-job training of "the exercise".

In 1560, Scotland became a Protestant country in name and by law. In actuality, because of the limited number of Reformed ministers, she became a religious vacuum. Knowing that that vacuum could easily be filled with a return either to Roman Catholicism or to paganism, the Reformers sought to fill it with the gospel. Preached or read, the gospel had to be in all the pulpits of the land.

### 1. *Superintendents*

The country was to be divided up into ten provinces. Over each province, a superintendent was to be appointed to act as an evangelist and church planter. Based in the major town of his province, he was to spend eight or nine months of the year visiting the surrounding congregations. He was to teach them the Reformed Faith, to administer the sacraments, and to supervise the settlement of ministers in vacant congregations.



Superintendents were to be appointed by the General Assembly, with local magistrates acting in conjunction. They were to be subject to the General Assembly and to a more local council of ministers and elders. The council could be drawn from the ministers and elders in the whole province, or all the churches in the major town of the province, or the church in the major town, depending on geographical location and stage of development reached. In their church planting activities, superintendents were to be the agents of those councils.

### *2. Readers and Exhorters*

When a superintendent was not present in a congregation, the pulpit of a church without a minister was filled by a reader. A reader was, as the name infers, one who was able to read a prepared service. Some readers were content to continue reading; others, through exhibition of gift and further training, moved toward becoming ministers. An intermediate group between readers and ministers, named exhorters, came into being. Exhorters were able to give a simple explanation of a Scripture passage and make a relevant exhortation by way of application.

Neither readers nor exhorters were considered ministers of the Word. Neither could administer the sacraments. The idea was that a reader would grow to become an exhorter and then a minister. An exhorter was, more or less, a trainee minister.

### *3. The Exercise*

The ministerial training came from the exercise. This was a weekly gathering for communal mentoring. Exhortations, sermons, and doctrinal lectures were given, discussed, and critiqued. Prospective ministers were identified, encouraged, and educated.

The exercise was also the conduit for passing on the decisions of the General Assembly and took on some administrative functions: so much so that by 1580 the exercise and the council had merged to become a presbytery or eldership.

To the degree that the plan was able to be put into practice, it was a success. From the twelve recognised ministers in Scotland in 1560, the number had grown to 252 ministers, assisted by 154 exhorters and 467 readers, by 1567.

## **B. Presbyterian Principles: Elders and Elderships**

We shall now look at the plan to see if it is consistent with Presbyterian principles. The plan had a goal. The order it created was transitional. But, as income tax shows us, the temporary can be exceedingly enduring. For there to be a successful transition to the desired end, the principles undergirding it must also inform the expedient.

### 1. Ministerial Parity

One of the first questions raised about the polity of the Scottish Reformers is whether or not the position of superintendent is consistent with the principle of ministerial parity: the doctrine that all ministers of the Word have the same authority and equal power under Christ. The suggestion is made that the superintendent is much closer to an Episcopalian bishop than a Presbyterian minister. James Ainslie puts forth eight arguments against the superintendent being a bishop in the Episcopalian or Anglican sense of the word. The sum of them is that even though in certain lights a superintendent might look like a bishop, in the cold light of day, no principled Episcopalian would recognise him as such.

Even if the Episcopalian were more pragmatic than principled, Hans Christian Andersen reminds us that just because something looks somewhat like a duck, it does not stop it being a swan. The English Reformer John Rodgers encouraged the Church of England to adopt superintendents who, under the authority of a bishop, were to be responsible for ten churches in which there would be readers. Bishops were to visit the churches and had the power to remove ministers and superintendents who were not doing their duty. Comparing the *FBD* with the system proposed by Rodgers, there is similarity, but also disjuncture. The Scottish superintendent has more on his plate than his proposed English counterpart; yet, he is not the functional equivalent of an English bishop. With regard to ministers and congregations, a Scottish superintendent and his council act like an English bishop. With regard to superintendents, an English bishop is the functional equivalent of the Scottish General Assembly. While they have some things in common, it cannot be said that a superintendent is a bishop in all but name. In practice as well as principle, they are different.

At the time of the Reformation, ministers could be appointed to preach in one church or to preach in a number of churches. In their administrative duties, they acted collectively in council and/or individually as the agents of council. Differences of function do not necessarily reflect different levels in a hierarchy. John Knox was minister of Edinburgh; and John Spottiswoode was superintendent of Lothian; both enjoyed the same authority and equal power under Christ.

### 2. Word and Sacrament

Another question focuses on the role of exhorters and, to a lesser extent, readers. A. I. Dunlop says that “the office of exhorter does not seem to harmonize with Knox’s emphasis on the unity of Word and sacraments”. Even allowing for the transitional nature of the position, is there a breach of principle in having preachers who are not ministers of both Word and sacrament?

The first thing to note by way of answer is that even with regard to ministers, there is a priority of Word over sacrament. Under the *FBD*, preaching services were to be held every day and twice on Sundays; yet, the Lord’s Supper was to be observed four times each year in the major centres of popu-

lation and twice each year in rural areas. Ministers were to bring both Word and sacrament, but they were not to bring both equally.

The second is that the *Second Book of Discipline (SBD)*, written at a time when principles were much more to the fore, describes three types of elders: ministers or pastors, doctors or teachers, and ruling elders or governors. Ministers labour in Word and sacrament. Doctors labour in Word only. Elders admonish according to the rule of the gospel. The Reformers' emphasis on the unity of Word and sacraments is just that; it is not a fixed principle that cannot allow for doctors or exhorters.

### 3. *The Principle Not Held*

Another stumbling block for some might be the autonomy of the local church: a principle to which the Scottish Reformers did not hold. They were profoundly connectionalist. They started off with a General Assembly. If there were not enough ministers for all the congregations, then congregations were to share. If there were no or not enough elders in a congregation, then there would be one eldership over a number of congregations. When needed, the elders of the congregations in a city would join together in a General Session. These things belonged to the transitional days of reformation, but they are applications of the principles of Presbytery.

## **C. The Reformation in Scotland: a Model for Missions?**

Based on Presbyterian principles illustrated by these historical examples from the Scottish Reformation, there are some suggestions which might open up our thinking.

### 1. *International Christianity*

While the work of the Scottish Reformers was the building of an indigenous church by an overwhelmingly indigenous group of preachers, we must not forget the international nature of the Reformation and of the Church. In the 1560s, many of the principal Reformers, those who would become the ministers and superintendents, had been exiled from Scotland for a number of years; others had not. Whether they had learned the Reformed Faith from first-hand experience of the Reformed Churches in Switzerland, France, or Germany, or learned it at home from the Continental Reformers' writings, or learned it from those who had returned from exile, the influences were from outside of the country. This, of course, has always been the case. In the Book of Acts, people heard the gospel from preachers of a different nationality and/or ethnicity from themselves who had come from Jerusalem, or heard it from their own countrymen who had been to Jerusalem and had returned home with the message of Jesus. Western Christianity is dependent on a Jew from what is now Turkey who came over to help. The building of a national church is an international effort.

## 2. *Infancy and Infirmary*

The Scottish Reformation model blurs the traditional distinction between home and overseas missions. Rather, it sees things in terms of developing churches. That developing church might be an expansion into another part of a country or a new beginning in another country altogether. Both require covering the ground using the resources to hand.

The model can also be applied to churches in need of redevelopment. Alexander Henderson spoke of superintendents, exhorters, and readers belonging to the infancy of the church. They might belong to it in its infirmities also. This model might be used to revive the work of the gospel in an area where it is in decline. It is better to maintain some form of gospel presence in a community than to remove it completely for want of the ideal.

## 3. *Office and Function*

Do we need the offices of superintendent, exhorter, reader, or doctor in the church today? No, the offices of minister and elder are sufficient. Nevertheless, the list of functions carried out by ministers and elders should extend far enough to encompass the roles of superintendents and the others.

For example, the *SBD* lists and describes the office of doctor. This office covered professors of theology and district catechists: anyone who was teaching doctrine. Speaking of the upper end of this spectrum, Henderson says that the church had no great practical knowledge of the office because it drew its theology teachers from the ranks of the ministry. This is as it should be. The ministry has within it those whose special gift group is teaching doctrine or exegesis as well as those whose gifts are more in the areas of exposition and pastoral application. Similarly, there are those whose gifts lie in ministering to one congregation and those whose energy and organizational gifts joined with their evangelistic preaching make them of greater use serving a number of smaller and perhaps struggling congregations.

Just as the upper end was, as it were, absorbed into the ministry, so has the lower end been absorbed into the eldership. In the olden days, there were catechists who held meetings in homes and gave, perhaps with the aid of an author's exposition, some teaching on the questions being memorized. Today, we would think nothing of a ruling elder teaching a Christian education class. Similarly, we would not be surprised to learn that an elder had read a sermon when the minister was absent. Nor would it shock us to discover that an elder had led a prayer meeting and made a few devotional remarks. Even in settled, modern congregations, centuries after the offices of doctor, reader, and exhorter have disappeared, their functions remain. If we expand this modern congregation to a number of congregations sharing a minister, there is no reason why ruling elders should not keep the church door open in his absence.

#### 4. *Theological Exercises*

One thing that remembering that there was once the office of doctor does is to remind us that theological education is an ecclesiastical task. The Reformers had the General Assembly overseeing both staff and institutions when it came to the formal education of prospective ministers. But they did not stop there. There was training for those who were perhaps older, less academically prepared, than the university students. It would be their gifts and service which would hold the fort until the new university taught ministers appeared.

To do the on the job training were the ministers who had returned from exile. In this, they were like those today who leave home to go abroad to study and then return home to minister. If the church uses such men to move toward an indigenous faculty of an indigenous seminary, in time, that church will have her indigenous educated ministry. But what will the people of that country do in the meantime? The model of the exercise makes the returning minister an evangelist to the people, and an example and mentor to practicing preachers and prospective ministers. Should not indigenous presbyteries come first?

The mentor will need resources. Small collections of appropriate books can be assembled and sent out to him. These will be his teaching tools, the beginning of ministers' libraries, and a lasting use of missions allocated funds.

Ecclesiastical theological education goes beyond seminaries having denominationally credentialed staff or even denominationally controlled seminaries. It takes us into the ongoing life of the church. Presbytery based seminars or tutorials were part of the Reformation model. Today, the administrative has all but shut out devotional exercises, never mind the continuing education of The Exercise.

#### 5. *Urban and Rural*

The Scottish Reformation model may look rather centralist, with its General Assembly and Superintendent's Councils; but with regard to the preaching of the gospel, it is a very decentralised model. Rather than bring the people to the gospel, it takes the gospel to them. Rather than gather the people out of their communities to some anonymous centre, it goes out to them where they live and witness.

Originally, the model was developed to bring the message of Christ to the countryside: small towns and farming districts. As the economies of agricultural communities slide, and church memberships dwindle, perhaps this model should be seriously considered.

On the other hand, with cities being made up of neighbourhoods more populous than towns or having swallowed up towns and made them into suburbs, rather than the "mega-church" with "small groups", why not have slightly larger groups, called congregations, and a meta-church, called pres-

bytery? Is there a question of resources? There is a model from the Scottish Reformation.

If this submission has provoked interest in a discussion<sup>1</sup> on this subject, please contact the author through Haddington House (haddington-house@eastlink.ca).

---

<sup>1</sup> This submission did not lend itself to footnoting; nevertheless, those interested will find further information in:

James K. Cameron, ed., *The First Book of Discipline* (Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press, 1972).

James Kirk, ed., *The Second Book of Discipline* (Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press, 1980).

Nigel M. de S. Cameron, ed., *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993).

Jack C. Whytock, *“An Educated Clergy”: Scottish Theological Education and Training in the Kirk and Secession, 1560-1850* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007).

James L. Ainslie, *The Doctrines of Ministerial Order in the Reformed Churches of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1940).

Wayne R. Spear, *Covenanted Uniformity: The Influence of the Scottish Commissioners upon the Ecclesiology of the Westminster Assembly* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2013).