

Faith in Transformation: Eskridge Covenanter Church and the Reformed
Presbyterian Church of North America, Eskridge, Kansas, 1884-1964.

Bo Lin

Chapman Center for Rural Studies

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This is an exploration of the Covenanter Church in Eskridge, Wilmington Township, Wabaunsee County. The Eskridge Covenanter Church belongs to the Reformed Presbyterian Church, which was from the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland. This study of the Covenanter Church relies on church records, interviews, historic atlases, old photographs, and Old World history.

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If you ask me where the Roman Empire is today, I would say it still exists in the United States, European Countries, Russia and even the Islamic world. If you ask me where the Eskridge Covenanter Church is, I would tell you that although physically gone, it is yet in all churches that are associated with Calvinist groups. The Protestant Reformation rendered the foundation for the future America. Many Protestants came to early colonial America because of persecutions and the desire for evangelization. Over the years, in some extreme views, people considered that some practices of Protestant sects and denominations were strange and cultist activities. Covenanters are one of the groups of Protestants that the public has little knowledge of and has often misunderstood, although they are a congregation of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America. From this research, the Eskridge, Kansas, Covenanters provide some answers to these misunderstandings.

Furthermore, there are today 6,940 members of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America and 97 congregations in America.¹ It is a small number compared with other mainstream denominations. Yet, the Eskridge Covenanters and the Covenanter Church can be understood through their history, historical doctrines, and historical practices behind their doctrines. In some perspectives, the church has declined, and the Eskridge Covenanter Church has disappeared. The truth is that they adapted to changes in society and transformed into a new culture, but their theologies and doctrines remained the same. Historians use the theory of transformation to explain the fall of the Roman Empire, Catholicism after the Council of Trent

¹ Maps and census numbers courtesy of the Topeka Reformed Presbyterian Church. The Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America is also represented in at least 25 U.S. states, three Canadian provinces, and has six churches also in Japan. Personal email to author from Pastor Brad Johnston, March 2, 2017.

during the Reformation, and Vatican II in the 1960s, instead of a theory of decline and fall. A theory of transformation can also be used in this research to explain the Eskridge Covenanter Church and the Covenanter Church in America in general.

History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church (Covenanter Church)

“A mighty fortress is our God, a trusty shield and weapon,” said Martin Luther, who ignited the Protestant Reformation and changed the history of mankind through the Thirty Years War (AD. 1618-1648) in Europe. During the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, however, represented only one denomination, Lutheran, of the Protestant league.² Another one is the Calvinist group led by the Reformed Church, which was started by John Calvin who influenced John Knox of Scotland. The Calvinist churches believe in five core points: Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace and Perseverance of the Saints.³ Historically, they believe that these five points are true and have risen against the Papacy and, sometimes, Kings. Near the end of the Protestant Reformation, one King that they rose up against was Charles I of England during the English Civil War (AD.1642-1651).⁴ This Calvinist group was the Scottish Reformed Presbyterians; and they called themselves the Covenanters, which means a Covenant between the Lord and his Congregation, as their flag shows in Figure I.

²There are two main branches in the Protestant League, the Protestant Church and the Reformed Church. They were united to fight against Roman Catholic Church for the political reasons, but their theology is different in many aspects. See “Historical Context for the Protestant Reformation readings by Martin Luther and John Calvin,” *The Core Curriculum* (Columbia College). <https://www.college.columbia.edu/core/content/protestant-reformation-selected-readings/context>

³There are hundreds of Calvinist denominations, but they all hold the core beliefs as true doctrine, according to Pastor Brad Johnston of Reformed Presbyterian Church in Topeka. Brad Johnston and Bob McFarland, interviewed by Bo Lin, Topeka Reformed Presbyterian Church, May 3, 2016.

⁴The Scottish Reformed Presbyterian Church actively challenged the Papacy in 16th century and assimilated to every aspect of Scottish life. The English Civil war was a fight between Parliamentarians, who supported democracy, and the Royalists who support Monarchy. There were also two civil wars in the same period. Some historians called this the “Puritan Revolution.” See John Coffey, *John Goodwin and the Puritan Revolution* (Boydell Press, 2006), pp. 97-130.



Figure I. A photograph of the Covenanter Flag during the English Civil War. Roses represent Christ and the throne of the Kingdoms. Before the reformed church established in 1689, Covenanters still believed that Christ was the King of Kings. Source: http://www.rampantscotland.com/know/blknow_covenanters.htm

The Covenanters in America: Prelude to Kansas

In the eighteenth century, the Covenanters came to America and were recognized as the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA). A Reformed Presbyterian congregation was organized in 1738 in Middle Octorara, Pennsylvania, but the first presbytery was not organized with ministers until 1774. In these 36 years, more and more people came to America to seek evangelization and opportunities to start a new life. Over time, the Covenanters became associated with the Presbyterian Church and Associated Presbyterian Church which, according to Pastor Brad Johnston, current pastor of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Topeka, have similar doctrines to RPCNA. (This is why they eventually joined each other in 1969, as discussed later). In 1798, the Irish rebelled against the United Kingdom, and many Irish Covenanters fled to America, which is the same year the RPCNA re-organized in Philadelphia.⁵

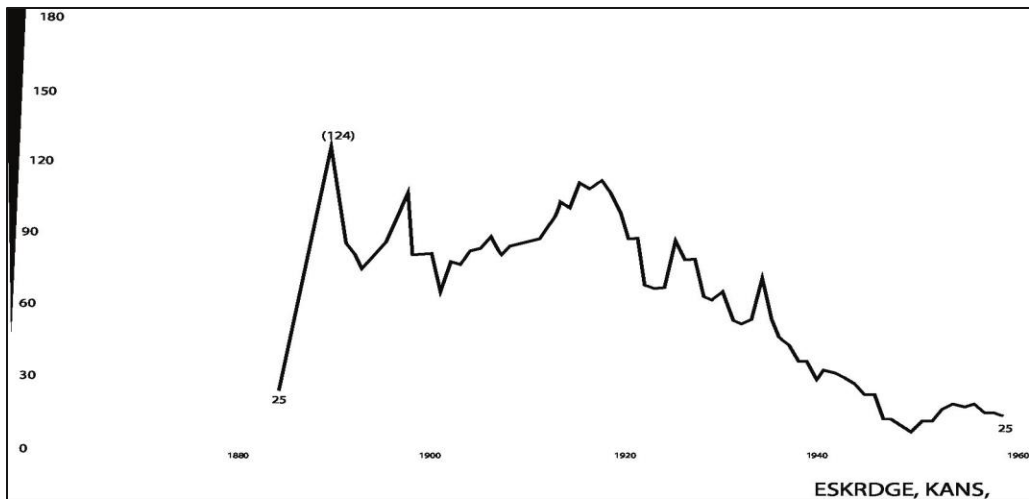
⁵Robert Emery, "Church and State in the Early Republic: The Covenanter's Radical Critique," *Journal of Law and Religion* 25 (2) (Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 487. <http://www.jstor.org.er.lib.k-state.edu/stable/20789491>.

The original Covenanters were both Scots and Irish. Thus, the Covenanters also are called Scottish-Irish (or Scots-Irish) Covenanters. Eventually, some American Covenanters settled in Wabaunsee County, Kansas. Oral accounts state that some of these Covenanters may have been part of a migration from Iowa.

Eskridge Covenanter Church

The Eskridge Covenanter Church was organized in 1884, a time during a land rush.⁶ There was a lot of land available yet south of Topeka, and Covenanters who were farmers made the decision to acquire cheap lands in Eskridge, Wilmington Township. According to Pastor McFarland, a former pastor of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Topeka, Eskridge Covenanters were from different regions, some of them even in Kansas already. In addition, the mass migration was also associated with the railroads. During 1880s, railroads were expanded in Kansas, and trains eased burdens of migrants; homesteaders also purchased railroad lands through the 1880s. The railroad that was constructed through the Eskridge was the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe. This helps to explain the booming membership in the Eskridge Covenanter Church, as shown in Figure II below, a graph of membership provided by Pastor McFarland.

⁶Eskridge is located 35 miles south of Topeka in Wabaunsee County and provided cheap land for Covenanters, according to J. W Stevenson. J. W Stevenson was a member of the Eskridge Covenanter Church. See J.W. Stevenson, "History of Covenanter Church," *Eskridge Independent* (August 2, 1934).



1880 1900 1920 1940 1960

Figure II.A chart of the Eskridge Covenant Church from 1884-1961. This chart shows the number of members in the Covenant Church from 1884-1960. Source: Covenant Records, given by Pastor McFarland, May 3, 2016.

Many farmers settled in an area called Covenant Flats, northeast of Eskridge and in what is actually another township, Mission Creek, as shown in Figures III and IV. The land in this area was prairie tableland, flat and fertile.⁷



Figure III & IV. Covenant Flats, Mission Creek Township, Wabaunsee County, Kansas. Northeast of Eskridge, Covenant farmers purchased lands in this area as a symbol of community. Photograph by M.J Morgan on April 2, 2016.

⁷Covenant Flats is a nickname related by Mrs. Benetta Foster of Eskridge during an interview with her. Covenant Flats is located northeast of Eskridge near the intersection of Wakarusa Road and Stratton Road. Benetta Foster, Interviewed by Bo Lin and Dr. M.J Morgan, April 2, 2016.

Research into plat maps and census data also shows some Covenanters with farms south of Eskridge.⁸ Covenanters living around Eskridge focused on their children's education; in Covenanter Flats, Mission Creek Township, they built a school at the crossroads leading to an area of Covenanter farms. This school, District School #29, is still standing at the crossroads of Wakarusa and Stratton Roads today.⁹

The Eskridge Covenanter Church started with 25 members, and their numbers dramatically increased until approximately 1888 because many Covenanters were coming for cheap land.

The Decline of the Covenanter Church

In 1893, a national economic depression began, and initially, the membership of the Eskridge Covenanters decreased; there were not enough railways operating to sustain many Kansas families.¹⁰ However, after this, the church saw increasing membership. There is a possible assumption for the growth of the church during the depression and drought of the 1890s. Nation-wide, when unemployment went up, more people joined churches and the armed forces. Then, in 1911, Covenanters in Eskridge experienced a tornado that completely destroyed the church. A plat map confirms that the Covenanter Church was not on the official record in 1911.¹¹ Members of the church decided to rebuild right after the calamity, as shown in Figure IV.¹²

⁸ For instance, the William and D.A. McKnight farms were prosperous orchard and stock farms located in Section 29, Township 14 South, Range 12 East of Wilmington Township. See The 1902 Wabaunsee County Atlas. See also Covenanter farms of A.A. and S.J. Dill in Wilmington Township south of Covenanter Flats.

⁹ District School #29 is shown in Section 34 of Mission Creek Township on the 1902 Wabaunsee County Atlas.

¹⁰The 1893 Panic and depression was caused by Sherman Silver Act, which allowed free production of silver and made silver the monetary standard. Many small railroads went bankrupt as a result, and larger railways did not run for months.

¹¹ Historical atlas of the town of Eskridge, Kansas, 1911.

¹²The Aikin family were also long-term members of the Eskridge Church. See Roberta Aikin Jordan, *Aikin Family History*, edited by Mary Aikin Huston (Records of Eskridge Covenanter Church, January 7, 1964), p.5.

During the rebuilding process, a stained glass window was put in, dedicated to Jemma Davis Martin in the Covenanter Church. This is still in the current Baptist Church, as shown in Figure V. Jemma Martin and her husband, Pastor Thomas John Martin, were very active and important members of the church at this time. They are shown in Figure VII. Amelia Martin Greenlee, a member of Jemma Martin's family who left Kansas in 1920, had many memories of Eskridge and the Covenanters. According to her, the stained glass window was in honor of the service of Jemma Martin in those years in the Covenanter Church before the tornado destroyed the church. The Martins dedicated their lives to the Eskridge Covenanter Church, and congregations remembered their kindness.



Figure V. A photograph of the second Covenanter Church. This church was built right after the 1911 tornado and served 50 more years for the Covenanters; it continues to serve a Baptist congregation today. Source: Covenanter Records held by Pastor Harold Jones, Eskridge, Kansas. Photo by M.J. Morgan, April 2, 2016, Eskridge, Kansas.



Figure VI. A photograph of the stained glass window, dedicated to Jemma Davis, in the current Eskridge Baptist Church, 2016. The Covenanters flag in the middle has changed from a cross to words, and it reminds Covenanters that sacrifices for Christ were made during the English Civil War. Photograph by Bo Lin, March 26, 2016.



Figure VII. A photograph of Pastor Thomas John Martin and his wife, Jemma Martin. Source: Bengie Foster, "I Love These Flint Hills." *Flint Hills Independent*, April 16, 1992.

In 1917, a second tornado hit the church, but the church fortunately was not damaged too badly. It continued to serve the Covenanters in Eskridge for another 54 years. However, during World War I, many young people were recruited in this small town, especially in 1918, and this caused another dramatic decline of the Eskridge Covenanter Church.¹³ When the war was over, many young people had died for their country and only some had returned. During the 1920s, the rise of automobiles provided fast transportation for the rural residents, and many Eskridge

¹³Roberta Aikin Jordan described her experience that her brothers joined the war effort. See Jordan, *Aikin Family History* (Records of Eskridge of Covenanter Church), p. 10.

residents moved west, including Covenanters.¹⁴ The Great Depression and World War II also caused reductions of members in the Eskridge Covenanter Church. However, some evidence about doctrinal problems also exists. According to Mary Aikin Huston, a former member of the Covenanter Church in Eskridge and a relative of the Martins, the decline of the Eskridge Church was because of the strict interpretation of the doctrine of “Regulative Principal of Worship.” This important Covenanter doctrine means, “what it is not commanded in the Bible is forbidden.” In addition, a unique practice called “closed communion,” based on this principle, states that members need to seek permission from the elders when the congregation takes communion.¹⁵ This practice may have caused dissent in the Eskridge congregation.

When the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America accepted political involvement in the 1960s and Covenanters began to join the larger RPC church, the Covenanter church building was sold to the Baptists in 1964.¹⁶ Some members of the Church joined the Presbyterian Church in Eskridge, and some of them went to join their sister churches in Topeka and Kansas City. However, there were yet a few remaining to meet in Eskridge as a continuation of the old Covenanter Church. In 1972, this group was officially dismissed. But the end of the Eskridge Covenanter Church does not indicate that their heritage is lost but rather that their heritage is transformed to the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Topeka and Kansas City. The records of Eskridge Covenanter Church, however, were given back to the headquarters of the

¹⁴Mrs. Greenlee’s family and Pastor William Aikin’s family moved to California in 1920, and there was no pastor for two years; that is why membership dropped again as the chart indicates. See Records of Eskridge Covenanters, p.41.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶*Bit of History from Former Residents of Eskridge* (Records held by Harold Jones).

Reformed Presbyterian Church in Pennsylvania, according to the current pastor of the Eskridge Baptist Church, Harold Jones.¹⁷

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Covenanter Church or Reformed Presbyterian Church has a rich history with conflicts, struggles and victories. Today, they have around 7,000 members in the United States. However, their influence cannot be overlooked. In the English Civil War, they upheld their doctrines and established freedom of worship based on the blood of martyrs. In the U.S., they re-formed, preached and came to Kansas to continue such a heritage. Their practices and doctrines are based on their conception of religious truth. Thus, we should see the doctrine of the RPCNA transformed into social practice and history through the influx of former Covenanters. Some Covenanters did join other churches in addition to the Reformed Presbyterian church after the dissolution of their church in Eskridge in 1964. But in the view of many historians, this is transformation rather than a change. Truth is revealed through historical studies, and the truth of the Covenanters' church is that it in some ways endures.

According to Pastor Brad Johnston of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Topeka, the Regulative Principle of Worship was indeed at one time very strict. Members who may have wanted to privately worship God through music and instruments, outside the church, were not permitted to use this private means. In the 1960s, the Covenanters and RPCNA began to see engagement with politics, once also strictly forbidden, and then by the early 1970s, with many young people going on to universities, the RPCNA modified their interpretation of Regulative Principle of Worship. It became more flexible and welcoming of private worship practices. However, the church service itself maintains its traditional and enduring practices of communal

¹⁷ Pastor Jones, interviewed by M.J Morgan and Bo Lin, April 16, 2016.

worship based on only the singing of the psalms. Today, membership in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America – and its Covenanter roots – is increasing.¹⁸

Coda: The Doctrine of the Reformed Presbyterian Church and its European History

Many Covenanters fought in the English Civil War alongside with Parliamentarians, but they turned against each other near the end because they could not reach an agreement. The Covenanters wanted to establish a government based on their doctrine.¹⁹ Their doctrines were officially announced in 1647, known as the Westminster Confession of Faith.²⁰ However, Covenanters lost their power and suffered further persecutions and decline during the reign of Charles II who restored episcopal polity in England, the hierarchy of Roman Catholicism.²¹ This persecution and suffering of Covenanters continued to 1687, when they were pardoned and freed from persecutions by the Declaration of Indulgences of James II.²² Protestants overthrew King James II of England in 1688.²³ After a series of political conflicts, in Great Britain, Scotland was ruled and guaranteed by governance of the church under Presbyterian law. Most Covenanters dissented and formed the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland.²⁴ However, the half

¹⁸ Interview with Pastor Brad Johnston, December 9, 2016.

¹⁹ Covenanters did not want a King, but they wanted a government that is based on Presbyterian hierarchical structure. See Emily Moberg Robinson, "Scottish Covenanters and the Creation of an American Identity," *The Journal of Presbyterian History* (1997-) 83 (1) (Presbyterian Historical Society, 2005), p. 54.

²⁰ The Westminster Confession of Faith created the Solemn League and Covenant, which was an arrangement between Covenanters and Parliamentarians during the English Civil War. See Ibid.

²¹ The event of persecution of Covenanters was called the "killing time." Covenanters refused to accept authority of bishops and angered Charles II. See Amy Witherbee, "Habeas Corpus: British Imaginations of Power in Walter Scott's "old Mortality"," *New Literary History* 39 (2) (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), p. 356.

²² James II was the last Catholic King in England, and England was dominantly Protestant. This Declaration benefited both Catholics and other "Heretics" because Protestants were persecuting non-Protestant Christians. See Mark Goldie, "John Locke's Circle and James II," *The Historical Journal* 35 (3) (Cambridge University Press, 1992) 558.

²³ The event is known as the "Glorious Revolution." Parliamentarians were victorious after a series of power struggles in England for half a century.

²⁴ Covenanters did not want kings to impose episcopacy on the Presbyterian Church. See "The Constitution of Reformed Presbyterian of Scotland," *Reformed Presbyterian of Scotland*. <http://www.rpcsotland.org/constitution-of-the-rpcs/>.

century struggles shaped the Covenanter Church and probably also influenced Covenanter history in the United States and worldwide.

There are three periods, 1647, 1871 and the 1960s that mark the development of their doctrine. The Westminster Confession of Faith in 1647 created a catechism that many Protestant churches hold. As Pastor Johnston said, the Reformed Presbyterian Church shares many core beliefs with other Calvinist groups, such as Baptists, Presbyterians and some Evangelicals.²⁵ As a part of Protestant groups, they affirm that the Bible is the only infallible rule. Yet, in a few ways, RPCNA affirms the doctrine of the original Christian (Catholic) Church, such as the major part of the Nicene Creed, Communion of Saints and etc.²⁶ The Westminster Confession established doctrines regarding scriptures, authority, the church, and baptism. For example, all Protestant churches acknowledge the Westminster Confession of Faith and also affirm infant baptism. However, the infant baptism of Reformed Presbyterians is different than that of Roman Catholicism. The Roman Catholic Church affirms the baptism as remission of sin instead of a symbolic meaning while the Westminster Confession of Faith accepts the symbolic meaning because infants have parents who are believers. Because of historical conflicts between the Reformed Presbyterian Church and secular powers, Covenanters hold that the mediatorial king is Christ, one of unique practices that distinguish them from other Calvinists.²⁷ Mediatorial kingship means that they view only Christ as the authority and do not recognize other authorities. Thus, RPCNA did not participate in politics until 1960s. Another unique practice is that they sing the Book of Psalms on Sunday without any musical instruments, and this tradition still

²⁵ Pastors Johnston and McFarland, interview by Bo Lin, May 4, 2016.

²⁶*The Constitution*, A-86 & A-90.3

²⁷Pastors Johnston and McFarland, interview by Bo Lin, May 4, 2016.

continues today.²⁸ Some members have pointed out that the a cappella style of worship is strange to many people.²⁹

The Covenanter Church has a history of change. The Covenant of 1871 expanded the explanations of Westminster Confession of Faith. It denied all other ecclesiastical polities as forms of government in the Church, and declared that Presbyterianism is “the only right insinuation of God.”³⁰ Many modern Presbyterians see this as a departure from historical Reformed Presbyterians.³¹ The Reformed Presbyterian convention of 1960s changed the passive attitude of Covenanters toward politics. Since the 1960s, Covenanters in the Reformed Presbyterian Church believe in national confession, which encourages congregations to bring a nation to confess and believe in Christ through political activities, according to Pastor Brad Johnston.³² Thus, the doctrine of the Reformed Presbyterians might seem to change, but it is more accurate to say that their practices are transformed into a modern sense while they still hold the same doctrine created during the Westminster of Confession of Faith in 1646.

²⁸ This pamphlet explains why Covenanters sing without musical instruments. Robert B. McCracken, *Instruments in Worship?*, (Crown & Covenant Publication, 1996). See further, Douglas W. Comin, *The Church's Perfect Hymnbook*, pamphlet (Crown & Covenant Publications, 2008).

²⁹ Mary Aikin Huston, “Our Covenanter Heritage,” *Records of Eskridge Covenanter Church*, 37.

³⁰ *The Constitution*, 1-8.

³¹ John Macpherson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith (1643-1652)* (Internet Archives, 1882), p.143. <https://archive.org/details/westminsterconf00unknuoft>

³² Pastors Johnston and McFarland, interview by Bo Lin, May 4, 2016.

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