

American Presbyterian Church History

1700's

‘By 1700 the colonial commonwealths of North America were becoming a prosperous extension of British provincial society, in which the prevailing outlook on life was unmistakably conditioned by a Reformed and Puritan ethos.’ —Sydney Ahlstrom, pp. 263

I. German Reformed Churches

A. Geographic Sources

1. Southern Germany - the Palatinate
2. Switzerland
3. Aided by the Amsterdam Classis

B. Settlements: largely Southern Pennsylvania

1. 1719 - Germantown = 1st church
2. Reading and Lancaster Counties

C. German ecumenism

1. Count Zinzendorf gathers scattered German bodies under his Moravian umbrella, ca. 1741
2. Lutheran Henry Muhlenberg frays the umbrella, helping to preserve the German Reformed identity

D. Significant figures

1. John Peter Miller (fl. 1750)
 - a. Ordained by Philadelphia Presbytery for the German Reformed
 - b. Fell under influence of the anabaptistic ‘Ephrata Community’
 - c. Translated the Declaration of Independence into German and other European languages for the Congress
2. Michael Schlatter

- a. Swiss (1746 arrival)
- b. Organized 1st German Coetus, 1747
 - (1) Under Classis of Amsterdam
 - (2) Philadelphia
- c. Later brought 700 Bibles, 6 ministers, and £12,000 from Holland
- d. Worked as agent of English ‘Society for Propagation of the Gospel among the Germans’
 - (1) Enlisted aid of King George’s chaplain
 - (2) Led to resistance of his leadership

II. Early establishment of Presbyterianism

A. Proto-Presbyterianism

1. Massachusetts

- a. 4,000 by 1639 per *Magnalia Christi*, p. 73

“‘I came from England’ said one inhabitant of Boston, ‘because I did not like the lord-bishops; but I cannot join you because I would not be under the lord-brethren.’” *Magnalia Christi*, p. 221 as footnoted in Chs. Hodge, *History...*, p. 31

- b. Salem Colony originally designed by Westminster member as a Presbyterian refuge

2. Connecticut was mainly Congregationalist, many of them having Presbyterian sympathies

3. Middle colonies

By 1700, there were 10 to 15 congregations in NY and NJ transplanted from New England

Oldest Presbyterian church (1644) built at Jamaica, Long Island; of its founder Mather wrote “Though he was a little man, yet he had a great soul. His well accomplished mind in his lesser body was an Iliad in a nut shell. I think he was blind in one eye—nevertheless, he was not the least among the seers of Israel.” cited in Hays, p. 64

4. The South

- a. N.E. transplants were stymied by the Anglican autocracy in VA, although a foothold was gained

in MD

b. By 1687, French Huguenots had organized at Charleston, SC

6. Leading Lights: The Mathers, John Eliot

B. Francis Makemie (1658-1708): “The Father of the American Presbyterian Church”

“A man of eminent piety and strong intellectual powers, adding to force of talents a fascinating address; and conspicuous for his dignity and faith as a minister of the gospel.” —Hays, p. 75

1. Beginning of his American work, 1683

a. In response to 1680 appeal letter from Col. Wm. Stevens of the MD council to Presbytery of Laggan in Ulster

b. Came through Barbados where he was licensed as a non-conformist. Traveled from Charleston to Boston, establishing a circuit of preaching points mainly on the Delmarva Peninsula southward

c. London retreat, 1704-05

–Returns with money and two ministers from ‘London Union of Presbyterian Ministers’ whose support would be underwritten for two years

2. December, 1706, the establishment of ‘The Presbytery’

a. Organized at Freehold, NJ, and occasioned by the need to ordain a licentiate in that church; all future meetings would be held in Philadelphia

b. Apparently met at the call of Makemie

(1) Diversity among first seven ministers

“It united in the persons of its seven ministers the two quite differing and often conflicting heritages of Puritan Presbyterianism and of Scotch and Scotch-Irish Presbyterianism, anticipating the pluralism, even at times polarity, that was to characterize American Presbyterianism.” —Loetscher, p. 61

(2) Uniquely built from the ground up

“A second important feature of this first presbytery was that it was organized 'from the

ground up,' not 'from the top down,' as was the Presbyterianism of Scotland which had been adopted by Parliament and implemented by the General Assembly. In America, on the contrary, the higher judicatories were created by the lower, establishing the more democratic nature of American Presbyterianism, and strengthening the concept that undelegated powers remain in the presbyteries, not in the higher judicatories.” —Loetscher, pp. 61,62

(3) Initial actions (1707)

“Our plan is to meet yearly and oftener, if necessary, to consult the most proper measure for advancing religion and propagating Christianity in our various stations and to maintain such a correspondence as may conduce to the improvement of our ministerial abilities.” —cited in Hutchinson, pp. 110,111

(a) Exposition of Hebrews at regular meetings

(b) Three overtures of preeminence

“First. That every minister in their respective congregations read and comment on a chapter of the Bible every Lord's day, as discretion and circumstances of time and place will admit. Second. That it be recommended to every minister of the Presbytery to set on foot and encourage private Christian societies. Third. That every minister of the Presbytery supply neighboring desolate places where a minister is wanting and opportunity of doing good is offered.” —Hays, p. 70

(c) Within a couple years, early attention given relations of ministers to their elders and congregations; also the call for the keeping of session minutes to be reviewed at Presbytery

d. 3,000 communicants

3. Makemie persecuted in NY, 1707, for “preaching without a license”

a. Governor Cornbury's impression of Makemie to the English gov't:

“I entreat your protection against this malicious man. He is a Jack-of-all-trades. He is a preacher, a doctor of physic, a merchant, an attorney, a counselor-at-law, and, which is worse than all, a disturber of Governments.” —in Hays, p. 75

Also, see Bancroft's opinion of Cornbury, (Hays, pp. 101-02)

b. Verdict: acquittal

(1) Makemie defended himself under the Parliamentary Act of Toleration, arguing that he and his creed were closer to the CoE than the Quakers who were protected under the act

(2) Still, Makemie forced to pay court costs of £83

- (a) Wrote pamphlet of protest
- (b) Reverberations contribute to recall of the Governor
- (3) Makemie's health broken while in prison; dies the next year
- c. "In the long run this event solidified the image of Presbyterians as defenders of freedom and won new respect for the denomination in America." —*Eerdmans HTCIA*, p. 56

C. The early General Synod, 1716

1. Oversight of Presbytery actions
2. Organized at the call of 'The Presbytery,' 1716
3. Comprised of four new presbyteries (Philadelphia, Long Island, New Castle, Snow Hill) out of the old one
 - a. 13 ministers and six elders at the first meeting in Sept. 1717
 - b. The 'Irish Presbytery of Londonderry, NH
4. Early Actions
 - a. 'A Fund for Pious Uses' established; subsidized by contributions from Glasgow, Scotland
 - b. By 1724, distance dictated that annual representation could be by delegates proportioned from the Presbyteries
 - c. Ministerial supply, 1735
 - (1) Condemnation of wholesale ordinations system in Ireland to supply America
 - (2) Dissatisfaction with local tutorial method of ordinands
5. 30 ministers by 1730
 - a. Many in N.E.
 - b. Continued migration from Ireland; e.g. Wm. Tennent whose Church of Ireland ordination was recognized in 1718

B. Significant Confessional questions of 1729

1. Official adoption of Westminster Standards

2. Beginnings of separation of church and state

a. 1722 - Jonathan Dickinson's synod sermon

“Tho we ought to reject both the Heresy, and the Communion of those, who deny what we esteem the Fundamental Truths of our holy Religion; yet even these essential Articles of Christianity, may not be imposed by Civil Coercions, temporal Penalties, or any other way whatsoever.” —Hutchinson, p. 112

b. 1729 - Westminster Confession adopted unanimously with the exclusion of key clauses in chpts. 20 and 23 dealing with the church's relation to the state

(1) No state control over synods

(2) No corporal punishment of religious heretics

3. The Adopting Act Question: ‘Strict or loose subscription to the standards?’

a. Background: Creeping Socinianism had split the Irish Presbyterian Church of Ulster in 1726. In 1727, John Thomson introduced an overture at synod to require strict

b. Two divergent parties

(1) Scotch Irish: a history of swearing to the covts – John Thomson

(2) English and Welsh Puritans: ‘God alone is Lord of the conscience’ – Jonathan Dickinson

c. Strict subscription arguments

(1) Need of doctrinal unanimity in the face of dangerous heresies and subtle aberrations (I Tim. 4:16)

(2) Why have such a ‘clinically precise’ creed if its details may be thrown to the wind?

(3) Is the church a confessional church if it gives only lipservice to the standards?

d. Loose subscription arguments

(1) The church's purity may be safeguarded by strict discipline of scandalous ministers and examination of candidates' religious experiences

(2) Subscription does not exclude the objects of its design, 'hypocrites nor concealed heretics'

(3) Whatever happened to Sola Scriptura as opposed to the opinions of men?

(a) Not even all of the Westminster divines favored strict subscription

(b) There is a 'glorious contradiction' between strict subscriptionism and chapter 20 of the confession which asserts 'God alone is Lord of the conscience'

e. Another glorious irony: Adoption of the Standards came only after scruples forced the unanimous exclusion of the magistrate references

f. Resolution

(1) compromise offered by Dickinson called for all ministers and ordinands to subscribe to the 'essential and necessary articles' of the Confession as containing the 'system of doctrine' taught in the Scriptures

(a) prefaced the Act with a qualifying statement on the Synod's abhorrence of any imposition upon other men's consciences

(b) 'essentials' to be interpreted by each presbytery or synod in case any man had scruples about particulars in the standards

i) 1736

ii) 1741

iii) 1927: G.A. hid behind Adopting Act of 1729 to overturn its earlier requirement of holding officers to the five fundamentals (essentials) of the faith

For the full text of the Act, see James Payton, 'The Background and Significance of the Adopting Act' in *Pressing Toward the Mark*, pp. 136-37

(2) A probable split between the two parties was thus averted, but was the compromise a Pandora's Box of latitudinarianism?

f. Ratified by 1st General Assembly in 1788, and aborted by the Confession of 1967

III. The Great Awakening

A. New England (ca. 1734-1741ff)

1. The worst of times

a. Political unrest

(1) Uncertain political future of NE colonies

(2) European wars injected into New World

b. An age of growing belief in mechanical determinism

(1) Deist Thomas Hobbes (d. 1679)

(2) NE Churches begin to recoil vs. determinism and Calvinistic predestination

c. A cold church

(1) Halfway covenant opened church membership to unbelievers

(2) Mechanical 'preparationism' emphasized formal religion

2. The best of times? — New Englanders and the Reformed churches grounded in the right presuppositions

B. The Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies

1. Pietism of anabaptists and Lutherans in PA and NJ

2. Theodore Frelinghuysen (1691-1747)

a. German ministering in 4 Dutch Reformed Churches in N. Jersey (1720ff.)

(1) Preached on necessity of personal conversion

(2) All 4 churches split after 4 years

b. Began cooperation of Presbyterians - viz. Gilbert Tennent, 1726

C. Presbyterian Revival

1. Log College men

a. Log College developed by Wm. Tennent, 1726

(1) Home seminary for sons and other candidates; 18 graduates

‘To me it seemed to resemble the school of the old prophets’ — Whitefield

(2) Spawned other Log Colleges as graduates went out

(a) Samuel Blair at Faggs Manor

(b) College of NJ, 1746; 4 of 12 trustees were Log College grads

b. Many graduates congregate in North Jersey, later forming New Brunswick Presbytery, 1738

c. Marked by evangelical zeal, which infected many N.E. trained Presbyterians there

2. Initial, formal opposition

a. Scotch Irish concern over ill-educated clergy = partly a smoke screen for real concern for shift of leadership to enthusiasts and English Presbyterians

(1) Emotional ‘falling experiences’

(2) Itinerant preaching without local invitation

b. 1741 - Synod resolves that Presbyteries could examine for ordination only men of NE or European training

3. Old Side–New Side Division (1741-58)

a. 1740 - Gilbert Tennent’s famous sermon, ‘The Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry’

(1) Lambastes cautious old side preachers: ‘...they are as blind as moles and dead as stones, without any spiritual taste and relish.’

(2) Printed throughout England and America

b. 1741 - Synod excludes the New Brunswick Presbytery by a narrow vote

(1) The absent Presbytery of NY quickly attempted to mediate a reconciliation

(2) 1745 - Presbyteries of New Brunswick, New Castle, and NY merge to form New York Synod as now opposed to Philadelphia Synod

c. New Side Progress

(1) In minority at split: 25 old side, 22 new side

(2) Zeal of NS was self propagating so that at reunion, 22 o.s. and 72 n.s.

d. Reunion, 1758

(1) After several initial N.S. overtures for peace

(2) Gilbert Tennent

(a) 1749 - 'Irenicum'

(b) led N.S. peace committee in dialogue

(3) Final compromise

(a) New Brunswick recognized

(b) No more uninvited itinerants

(c) Presbyteries would set their own academic standards for admission

D. Whitefield in the middle colonies

1. Preached for Frelinghuysen and Tennents

2. 1740-41 = high tide of Awakening

E. Fruits of the Great Awakening

1. Church growth

a. Converts

b. Divide and multiply axiom

2. Social benefits from widespread morality

3. Educational institutions to train leaders

a. Log Colleges

b. College of NJ, 1746

(1) Moved from Elizabethtown and Newark to Princeton, 1755

(2) Early presidents: Dickinson, Aaron Burr, Edwards, Samuel Davies

c. University of PA

(1) Grew out of Franklin's 100' X 70' New Side Auditorium

(2) G. Tennent's church met there for 9 weeks

(3) 1751 - used for an academy

(4) 1791 - University of PA

d. Queen's College of Dutch Reformed

(1) 1747 - had divided: Old Side under Amsterdam, New Side in American Coetus

(2) Reunion in 1772 recognized ministers training at Queens

e. Dartmouth, 1769: to train missionaries to Indian

4. Indian mission

a. Samson Occom

b. David Brainerd (1718-47)

(1) Converted in NE Awakening

(2) Expelled from Yale for his zeal

(3) 1742 - licensed by New Light Congreg. Church and sponsored by Scottish S.P.C.K.

(4) 1744 - ordained by New Side Presbytery

(5) Labored among Indians in NJ and up the Susquehanna Valley

(6) Died of TB in J. Edwards home

(a) Engaged to his daughter

(b) Provoked Edward's Indian involvement at Stockbridge

(c) Life and Diary of David Brainerd greatly helped the cause of missions in America

F. Spiritual decline after the Awakening

1. Church splits over the pain of a new idea

2. Doctrinal pamphleteer war

3. French and Indian War

'The Great Awakening decided that America should be a predominantly Christian land. It stimulated moral earnestness, missionary zeal, philanthropy, cooperation across denominational lines, and the founding of educational institutions. It gave new value and confidence to the average man and so contributed to the development of democracy in America. It strengthened the non-established churches more than the established, and so helped to prepare for religious freedom.' — Loetscher, pp. 68,69