

TWO EARLY AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN PASTOR- THEOLOGIAN: SAMUEL DAVIES AND ARCHIBALD ALEXANDER

Christopher K. Lensch

Introduction

American Presbyterianism has a rich tradition of producing pastors who have been interested in theology. Since the Reformation, Presbyterianism has stressed the importance of an “educated ministry.” If pastors are to teach their flocks how to “love the Lord your God with all your mind,”¹ then they themselves must cultivate this faculty in pursuit of the knowledge and enjoyment² of God.

Besides requiring extensive training in theology and biblical studies, Presbyterianism encourages its prospective pastors to gain a solid foundation in the liberal arts. One reason for this is because pastors will be ministering to souls from almost every social strata and from many levels of education and life experience. His breadth of knowledge and his maturity of thought will open opportunities for the pastor to relate to people from different strata in life. A college education can accelerate and collocate what otherwise might take 20+ years of adult life experience.

Masters of Divinity Should Master the Subject

The initial rigorous and then on-going study of theology by the pastor serves several purposes. Of first importance for the servant of the Lord is the necessity of knowing Whom he serves. There are plenty of false prophets today and mercenary shepherds who view the ministry as just another profession that is part of the care industry, albeit, within a religious context. These blind leaders of the blind will bear a greater judgment before God’s throne. To serve the living God, however, is to serve as His duty-bound ambassador, declaring and doing His will without regard to one’s personal desires.

Secondly, because the study of God is unfathomable, pastor-teachers should make it their life-long pursuit to begin to know the perfections and purposes of God. To plumb the excellencies of God should, *ipso facto*, lead pastors and their flocks to glorify God for who He is. Some pastors complain of dry wells after a number of years of preaching; oftentimes the dearth is the result of doing all ministry and not “doing theology.”

Of course, the study of theology should be more than an academic exercise. Pastors pursue the knowledge of God for God’s sake, and a third reason is to learn practical uses of that knowledge. Pastors are spiritual leaders who must lead God’s flock into green pastures.

Finally, the mastery of theology coupled with the tools of logic and rhetoric will enable pastors to defend revealed truth³ against its adversaries, because not all men have faith.⁴

Presbyterian Paradigm from Early America

Francis Makemie, the earliest Presbyterian church planter in the new world, had taken formal training in theology before receiving his ministerial credentials from the Presbyterian church in Ulster. His advanced training served him well in planting churches on the eastern seaboard and in organizing the first presbytery of ministers who had been arriving from the Old World (1707). His liberal arts training and his Reformation perspective also were particularly useful when he was forced to defend his right to preach against the unjust governor of New York.

While other early American denominations⁵ did not always encourage formal training for their ministers, colonial Presbyterians insisted upon maintaining their hallmark of fielding educated ministers. Presbyterian ministers of the colonial 1700s found training at institutions either in the British Isles or at New England Congregational bastions like Yale University. Many also were tutored by skilled ministers at the tutor's home church. Often an annex to the church was erected and dedicated to the training of prospective ministers. These rough-hewn cabins became derisively known as "log colleges."⁶

Out of these log colleges, however, came some of America's most skilled churchmen and pastors for that era. Chief among these were Gilbert Tennant with his brothers, and Samuel Davies. These men were classically trained. To them were imparted the great truths of historic Christianity. Their grasp of true doctrine coupled with the Reformation spirit that they imbibed from their Presbyterian forefathers gifted them for fruitful ministries.

Early America was blessed with many noted pastor-theologians, with none greater than Jonathan Edwards.⁷ While numerous examples could be cited, this article will survey two key Presbyterians: *Samuel Davies*, a leader in the first Great Awakening before America's independence, and *Archibald Alexander*, who helped cultivate the groundwork of the second Awakening and who labored during the formative years of the new nation.

Samuel Davies

Edwards, who sparked the Great Awakening in New England in the early 1740s, was interested in revivals in other colonies, especially after he met George Whitefield, who was the common denominator in the spread of the Awakening. In 1749 Edwards took note of the activities of the young Samuel Davies in Virginia, and wrote,

I have heard lately a credible account of a remarkable work of conviction and conversion among whites and Negroes at Hanover, Virginia, under the ministry of Mr. Davies, who is lately settled there, and has the character of a very ingenious and pious young man.⁸

Samuel Davies, of Welsh descent, was born in Delaware in 1723. His Baptist mother named him “Samuel” because she had asked him of God after a time of not being able to bear children. Samuel late in life confessed that he believed his most important blessings were the result of the prayers of his pious mother.

His pious parents also guided him toward the ministry. Unable to afford a university education, young Samuel was given into the hands of Samuel Blair at Faggs Manor, Pennsylvania. Davies would write fondly in his journal of those days at the Log College,⁹ and he was happy whenever he could return there even after Mr. Blair had passed to glory.

At age 22 Samuel Davies was licensed to preach the gospel by the New Castle (Delaware) Presbytery, and a year later he was ordained as an evangelist to Virginia. In his new assignment he pastored seven churches spread through five wilderness counties. His later principle area of activity became Hanover County in eastern Virginia. There he left his mark in three significant ways:

1. Davies was the driving force in organizing the Hanover Presbytery, of which he was the first moderator.¹⁰ This presbytery included all Presbyterian ministers in Virginia and North Carolina.
2. Davies ministered in a colonial era when the Anglican Church was the only legal church—all others were “sects” that had to apply to the crown for a license to preach and assemble.¹¹ Samuel Davies was the leading voice of his day in advocating religious liberty and early civil rights, and through his prudent and gracious approach to the governor, a measure of liberty was attained. When the college of New Jersey asked him to visit England in behalf of the college to raise funds for a new campus at Princeton, he refused twice. Upon reconsideration at the third appeal, a major factor in moving him to take leave from his ministry and dear family was the knowledge that he might be more useful in England than in Virginia in seeking religious freedom for dissenters.¹²
3. Finally, Samuel Davies had a formative influence on the young Patrick Henry.¹³ Henry’s Anglican mother, who had embraced Presbyterianism during the Great Awakening, first took her son at age eleven to hear the evangelist Davies. Many more visits to the Hanover Meeting House followed during Henry’s teenage years. Young Patrick delighted as much in Davies’ rhetorical flare as in the gospel message and the message of personal freedom in Christ. Patrick Henry later revealed the beginnings of oratorical aspirations: “*I was first taught what an orator should be by listening to Davies preach.*”¹⁴

A gifted public speaker with the noblest of messages, Davies used his gifts and organizational skills to bring the light of the gospel to America’s first colony. Many call him the “Apostle of Virginia.”

In demand as a gifted preacher and colonial leader, Davies’ last change of course as a pastor-theologian came when he reluctantly responded to a call to serve as the President of the College of New Jersey at Princeton. Jonathan Edwards had just died in that position after a short tenure, and the board wanted someone with wide recognition like Edwards’, who had scholastic

talents and ministerial experience, and who also was sympathetic to New Side (revivalistic) Presbyterianism. Samuel Davies, who had raised money for Princeton, was that servant leader. Davies served from 1759-1761 and influenced a host of graduates who would enter service to the new country as judges, congressmen, signers of the Declaration of Independence, and chaplains in the Continental Army, as well as a host of faithful ministers of the gospel. He died of pneumonia, burned out from a life of over-exertion before age 38.

A poet in his own right, Davies had been asked on different occasions to compose burial epitaphs for the tombstones of his church members. Christian hymns that he left Christ's church are part of his own lasting legacy. Recognized as America's first hymn writer in the mold of Isaac Watts, one of his most famous is "Great God of Wonders," set to music by John Newton:

"Great God of wonders! All Thy ways are matchless, God-like, and divine;
But the fair glories of Thy grace more God-like and unrivaled shine.
In wonder lost, with trembling joy, we take the pardon of our God:
Pardon for crimes of deepest dye, a pardon bought with Jesus' blood.
O may this strange, this matchless grace, this god-like miracle of love,
Fill the whole earth with grateful praise, and all th'angelic choirs above.

Archibald Alexander

Archibald Alexander was born in 1772 in a log cabin on the western slopes of the Blue Mountains of Virginia. His grandfather Alexander had immigrated to Pennsylvania from Londonderry, Ireland, just a few years before the Great Awakening, from which time he counted his conversion. Archibald's father was a Presbyterian elder and prosperous farmer in the central valley of Virginia.

Archibald's early farm experiences taught him personal responsibility and self-reliance. He loved the outdoors, from which he later would relate vivid yet homey sermon illustrations. He was reading the New Testament at age five, and by the age of seven he had memorized the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

In 1774 the Hanover Presbytery had established a training institute in Alexander's neighborhood, the "Liberty Academy."¹⁵ There his early teen years were spent under the tutelage of William Graham, who had sat under the august John Witherspoon at Princeton. Graham taught his students classical languages, science, and Archibald's favorite subject, philosophy. Graham exercised considerable personal influence over his students, and one of his dictums left a lasting impression on Archibald Alexander: "If you ever mean to become a theologian...you must come at it not by reading but by thinking."¹⁶

His time at the academy polished his critical thinking skills and exposed him to the world of ideas. Young Alexander showed scholarly promise early, and by age 16 he himself was tutoring his own pupils in eastern Virginia. Teaching Latin forced him to master the language, a tool that would open for him the theological works of western Christianity.¹⁷ He had a gift for

languages, and their mastery cultivated in him a precision of thought and facility of expression. A life-long habit was to read daily a chapter from the Hebrew Testament.

While tutoring away from home, the writings of the Puritan, John Flavel, deeply impressed young Archibald. In fact he counted his own spiritual transformation from a Sunday evening when he was reading a Flavel sermon to friends. Thereupon he drank deeply from many Puritan writers, but confessed his greatest debt to Flavel.¹⁸

At the encouragement of Graham, his old mentor, Archibald Alexander was licensed to preach in 1791. He was only 19 years old. Between this time and his ordination three years later by the Hanover Presbytery, he ventured into an extended period of itinerant preaching, often composing his sermons in the saddle. David Calhoun captures the critical importance of this development for the budding pastor-theologian: “Alexander’s whole ministry was shaped by the experiences of these years. He learned to preach simple sermons in plain language, combing the great doctrines and themes of the Bible with searching application.”¹⁹ Later as a seminary professor he would prescribe itinerant preaching to his own students.

God was preparing the young Alexander to play a pivotal role in the formation of Princeton Seminary, renowned for its balance of scholasticism and evangelical piety. By age 24 he had taken over the presidency of Hampden-Sydney College, an institution founded by the Hanover Presbytery to train pastors in Virginia. Showing the heart of a pastor, he kept one of his congregations in the early stages of this new duty.

After several years at the helm of the college, he left to re-enter the pastorate. He also married, “finding a good thing” in Janetta, the daughter of one of the leading Presbyterian preachers of Virginia.²⁰ As he began his labors at the Third Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Archibald Alexander could not see that he was shortly destined to serve for the rest of his life as a seminary professor and administrator. Janetta would be God’s gift²¹ to reinforce in him the supreme importance of preaching God’s Word.

America was growing westward in the early 1800s. In response to pleas from the pastor of Philadelphia’s influential Third Presbyterian Church and other like-minded colleagues to produce more laborers for the harvest, the General Assembly determined to establish a new seminary at Princeton. The location would give access to the resources of the College of New Jersey there, and it was located on the border of the two largest synods of Philadelphia and New York. Archibald Alexander was drafted to lead the fledgling endeavor.

With his pastoral experience on the frontier as well as in the urban setting of Philadelphia, and with his academic and administrative credentials from his time at Hampden-Sydney College, Alexander was the right choice. In 1812 he moved his family of six to Princeton. That year his home served as the seminary’s classroom, library, chapel, and dining hall.²² Alexander undertook the burden of developing a new curriculum while teaching every subject in every department. A later student wrote of that first year, “We are appalled at the burden that was laid on one pair of shoulders!”²³

Conclusion

Such is the heart of the pastor-theologian. Ministry means sacrificial service, even for those who minister God's Word inside ivy-covered halls. Ministry means diligent labor in the Word²⁴ even when one is called to shepherd the sheep. The ministry is more than the method, and it is even more than the message. Gifted men like Alexander and Davies modeled the standard of the apostle—they imparted their own lives along with the message.²⁵

Samuel Davies put his life at risk and he had to commit his family to God when he crossed the stormy Atlantic during the winter in order to raise money from England to relocate the College of New Jersey to Princeton. He saw God bless that endeavor and he gained his own desire of a greater measure of freedom for dissenting preachers in Virginia. Davies' theological and classical training prepared him for these opportunities and for others that followed.

Alexander's first year as the sole professor at Princeton Seminary was difficult but rewarding. His reward was to set the course of the institution and to shape the tenor of the ministries of its graduates for more than a hundred years. This pastor-theologian marked his imprint upon Princeton Seminary in his inaugural message when he preached from the words of Jesus: "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and these are they which testify of me."²⁶ That is the theological duty of all pastors who are called to know Christ and to make Him known.

¹ Mark 12:30.

² Westminster Shorter Catechism #1.

³ "Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers" (Titus 1:9.).

⁴ 2 Thess 3:2.

⁵ Methodists and Baptists kept up better with frontier expansion after America's independence by ordaining willing, though untrained, lay leaders.

⁶ The most famous account of one of these log colleges was written by Archibald Alexander and is available from Banner of Truth Press. *The Log College* describes the setting and training that William Tennant, who was trained in Ireland, offered his sons and other young men. This log college was at Neshaminy, Penn., northeast of Philadelphia. Another famous log college was the Rev. Samuel Blair's at Faggs Manor, Penn., south west of Philadelphia. Samuel Davies was trained in theology there. The "graduates" of the log colleges played prominently in promoting the first Great Awakening.

⁷ Edwards, a Congregationalist, is justly recognized as one of the top five theologians in Christian history, and one of the best thinkers that America has produced. Edwards did the preponderance of his theological writing during his 35+ years as a pastor and frontier missionary. Holding Presbyterian sympathies, he spent the last few months of his life as president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton), but otherwise he must be recognized as the classic "pastor-theologian."

⁸ Cited at <http://www.pastwords.net/pw222.html>.

⁹ Davies wrote, "Oh, how dreadful is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

¹⁰ The Hanover Presbytery was the mother of Presbyterianism in the South. Its spiritual heir still exists today under the same name. More information on the modern Hanover Presbytery may be found at <http://www.rpchanover.org/>.

¹¹ Davies was the first dissenter ever to receive a government license to preach in Virginia.

¹² During his year in England he actually did preach for King George II.

¹³ Delegate to the Constitutional Convention, George Mason, described Henry's oratorical skills: "He is by far the most powerful speaker I have ever heard. Every word he says not only engages, but commands the attention, and your passions are no longer your own when he addresses them." Cited in "Foundations of Liberty: Patrick Henry," p. 26.

¹⁴ “From Davies, young Patrick grasped the force and devastating effect of well-directed forensics,” wrote Eva C. Hartless in her 1977 biography of Henry’s mother, Sarah. “The skills of speaking—measured enunciation, carefully structured thinking, the harmony of words, the rhythm of language, the subtle persuasion of spontaneous gesticulation—all were evidenced in Davies’s sermons. Patrick looked upon him as the greatest orator he ever heard. In addition, he caught from him the inspiration of the free and patriotic spirit flashing in the tapestry of fire he wove with every message.” –Cited at <http://www.pastwords.net/pw222.html>.

¹⁵ Not quite a “log college,” this church sponsored 24’ X 28’ cabin was a prep academy.

¹⁶ Cited in Calhoun’s *Princeton Seminary*, I: 48.

¹⁷ Alexander confessed that in the last half of his life he had read more works in Latin than in English. Cited in Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary*, I: 45.

¹⁸ “To John Flavel I certainly owe more than to any uninspired author.” J.W. Alexander’s *Life of Archibald Alexander*, p. 44.

¹⁹ Calhoun, I: 49, 50.

²⁰ Janetta was the daughter of James Waddell who had been encouraged to undertake the ministry by none other than Samuel Davies. An eloquent pulpiteer, Patrick Henry claimed inspiration from Wadell’s preaching also.

²¹ Alexander’s decision to take a detour to meet the famous Rev. Wadell, who by then was blind, proved to be life-changing. Alexander could confess with Eleazer, “I being in the way, the Lord led me” (Gen 24:27).

²² How fitting that the first building on the campus of Princeton Seminary should be renamed “Alexander Hall” following the founder’s years of service and since the school had grown out of his home.

²³ Cited in Calhoun, I: 59.

²⁴ 1 Tim 5:17.

²⁵ “We were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives [viz., souls]” (1Thess 2:8); ctr. v. 6.

²⁶ John 5:39.