

## **PRESBYTERIANISM IN AMERICA**

### **The Eighteenth Century**

**John T. K. Dyck**

#### **America's First Presbyterians**

God's ways are past finding out. How the gospel is spread throughout the world is a great mystery to human eyes. Often one nation readily receives the Word of God while others reject it very adamantly. Persecution in one nation can result in revival and growth in another. And so a curious working of Providence can be seen in the way that the Presbyterian religion was brought to America. Although about seventy of the Westminster Divines devised a plan to send the gospel to the colonies, Satan appears to have hindered them and nothing was done to implement this plan. Nevertheless God did have a plan for bringing the gospel to the New World.

The Scottish covenanters had a godly concern for sound doctrine and were diligent in catechizing both children and adults. Their strong beliefs resulted in more than a few military conflicts with the King of England. It was their portion, in the providence of God, to lose the Battle of Dunbar in 1650. While they must certainly have wondered at the Lord's purpose in permitting this critical loss, that same Lord decreed that the victorious general Cromwell should send the captives by shiploads to the plantations in the colonies to be sold. Thus the Lord not only populated the colonies, he did so with men who were strong Calvinists.

These Scottish Presbyterians were joined by disaffected English Puritans and Congregationalists who had also become Calvinists. Jedediah Andrews began preaching in the New World in 1682 and ten years later Francis Makemie joined him. These men earnestly sought to preach the gospel to needy souls and to feed the flock of Christ. The fact that the first presbytery in the colonies was not formed until 1706 indicates their emphasis on preaching and evangelism over mere organization. The fact that they *did* establish a presbytery also indicates that they understood the importance of Biblical church government. The number of Presbyterian ministers had grown to eight men; and Francis Makemie, the father of American Presbyterianism, was instrumental in organizing them into the Presbytery of Philadelphia. Very little is known of the exact date or circumstances of the formation of this historic presbytery, due to the loss of the first page of the minutes book.

Although Makemie appears to have lacked the vigorous personality of John Calvin or John Knox, he was a man of strong convictions. When the governor of New York demanded that he obtain a license to preach, he defied him by conducting a service in the home of a church member with the doors wide open, preaching without the required license. He was later arrested and, at some considerable personal expense, defended his actions in a court of law and was acquitted. This became a significant factor in the establishment of religious liberty in New York. His evangelistic zeal was evident in his travels throughout the colonies, preaching the gospel and recruiting ministers.

By 1716 the church had grown so that four existing presbyteries were joined to form a General Synod.

## The Log College

In 1718 William Tennent began a modest training school for candidates to the ministry. It came to be known as the Log College. When the evangelist George Whitefield came to America he had a close association with the College, and recorded in his Journal:

The place wherein the young men study now, is in contempt called *The College*. It is a log house, about twenty feet long, and near as many broad; and to me it seemed to resemble the school of the old prophets, for their habitations were mean.... All that we can say of most of our universities is, they are glorious without. From this despised place, seven or eight worthy ministers of Jesus have lately been sent forth: more are almost ready to be sent, and the foundation is now laying for the instruction of many others.<sup>1</sup>

The College was a fruitful training ground that produced men who were sound in doctrine and warm in their preaching. This rare combination was later blessed of the Lord to bring great revival.

These times were not without controversy, however. Many who were jealous for the sound doctrine of the Scriptures thought that there was too much emphasis placed upon experience. Others who saw the mighty working of God upon sinful men were of the opinion that the church had succumbed to a deadness that had only an external show of religion.

During this time the diversity of the Presbyterians became more apparent: they included Scottish, Irish, and English elements, each of which was confessional in its composition. However, each of these traditions brought a differing view of subscription to the Confession, often based on experiences brought from the Old World. All were agreed that they would own the Westminster Standards as their confession. But what was to be the nature and extent of their subscription to those standards?

## The Adopting Act

To resolve the difference, an overture was introduced to the Synod of 1728, but, “judging this to be a very important affair, unanimously concluded to defer the consideration of it till the next Synod.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Archibald Alexander, *The Log College* (reprinted; London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), 12.

<sup>2</sup>*Minutes, 1728*; cited by Samuel J. Baird, *Digest of the Acts and Deliverances of Assembly* [<http://www.pcahistory.org/documents/subscription/adoptingact.html>].

In April, 1729 Jedediah Andrews wrote, “We are now likely to fall into a great difference about subscribing the Westminster Confession of Faith.” Someone suggested a formula for subscription. Andrews reported, “The proposal is, that all ministers and intrants should sign it, or be disowned as members.” The Confession itself was not a problem, “but to agree to making it a test of orthodoxy and term of ministerial communion” was not agreeable. In his opinion the lines were drawn very clearly on the matter: “I think all the Scotch are on one side, and all the English and Welsh on the other, to a man.”<sup>3</sup>

There were other strong sentiments opposing strict subscription to the Confession. Jonathan Dickinson was a strong Calvinist who had brought his Congregational church into the new synod. He wrote that

the churches of New England have always been non-subscribers, and yet retain their first faith and love. Subscription, therefore, is not necessary to the being or the well-being of a church; unless hatred, variance, emulation, wrath, strife, sedition, and heresies are necessary to that end.<sup>4</sup>

Much of the contention appears to have arisen, on the one hand, out of a concern that the Confession would carry the same weight as the Word of God, and, on the other, the fear that essential doctrines of the Confession would soon be compromised if not protected by strict subscription.

In 1729 the General Synod passed the Adopting Act which brought the two parties together and was passed unanimously. It stated:

Although the synod do not claim or pretend to any authority of imposing our faith upon other men’s consciences, but do profess our just dissatisfaction with and abhorrence of such impositions, and do utterly disclaim all legislative power and authority of such impositions, and do utterly disclaim all legislative power and authority in the Church, being willing to receive one another, as Christ has received us to the glory of God, and admit to fellowship in sacred ordinances all such as we have grounds to believe Christ will at last admit to the kingdom of heaven; yet we are undoubtedly obliged to take care that the faith once delivered to the saints be kept pure and uncorrupt among us, and so hand down to our posterity.

And do therefore agree, that all the Ministers of this Synod, or that shall hereafter be admitted into this Synod, shall declare their agreement in and approbation of the Confession of Faith with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the assembly of Divines at Westminster, as being in all the essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine; and do also adopt the said Confession and Catechisms as the confession of our faith.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Richard Webster, *A History of the Presbyterian Church in America, from Its Origin until the Year 1760* (Philadelphia: J. M. Wilson, 1857), 105.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, 107.

<sup>5</sup>*Minutes, 1728.*

The Synod disagreed with certain clauses in the twentieth and twenty-third chapters of the Westminster Confession which gave the magistrate controlling power over the Synod. These were declared to be exceptions to the adoption of the Confession.

Aside from this, other scruples could be declared in order to be judged by the Synod or Presbytery as to their doctrinal integrity:

And in case any Minister of this Synod, or any candidate for the ministry, shall have any scruple with respect to any article or articles of said Confession or Catechisms, he shall at the time of his making said declaration declare his sentiments to the Presbytery or Synod, who shall, notwithstanding, admit him to the exercise of the ministry within our bounds and to ministerial communion if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge his scruple or mistake to be only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship or government. But if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge such Ministers or candidates erroneous in essential and necessary articles of faith, the Synod or Presbytery shall declare them incapable of Communion with them.<sup>6</sup>

This compromise document brought peace to the new Church for a few years. Richard Webster records that “no instance of erroneous teaching is known to have occurred until 1735, in the case of Samuel Hemphill.” This young man had been ordained and adopted the Confession. He was a popular speaker and was invited to preach as an assistant to Jedediah Andrews, until many of the congregation became “disgusted with the sentiments he uttered.” Andrews was prepared to bring charges against him for erroneous teaching. A dialogue of his was published in the paper, in which he asks:

Upon the supposition that we all have faith in Christ, as I think we have, where can be the danger of being exhorted to good works? Is virtue heresy? . . . Will you persecute, silence, and condemn a good preacher for exhorting men to be honest and charitable? . . . Supposing our fathers tied themselves to the Westminster Confession: why should not a synod in George the Second’s time have as much right to interpret the Scriptures as one that met in Oliver’s time? . . . If any doctrine there maintained is, or shall be thereafter found to be, not altogether orthodox, why must we be forever confined to that or any other Confession?<sup>7</sup>

Evidence against him was presented in

eight articles, drawn from the sermons he had heard, either impugning or leaving out of view original sin and the blood of Christ, and representing salvation by the merits of Christ, as setting God forth as stern and inexorable. After many delays, Hemphill produced his notes, and the commission declared him erroneous in doctrine, and suspended him.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Webster, *History*, 110.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

This incident is referred to at length here because of its similarity to the current promotion in Presbyterian circles of a definition of justification that confuses it with sanctification and makes works a part of justification itself. This error is not new; nor is it only recently that it has been refuted by Presbyterians.

## **The Great Awakening**

The Log College produced such prominent preachers as Gilbert Tennent and Samuel Blair. Both of these men were influenced by the experiential preaching of the Methodist Calvinist George Whitefield and the Dutch Calvinist Theodorus Frelinghuysen. All these men were associated with the revival of this period called the Great Awakening.

The combination of sound doctrine and a personal call to repentance was blessed in a singular way by the Lord. Many souls were saved, and the power of God was manifest in the preaching of His Word. It was well called the Great Awakening, for it was as if the church had fallen asleep and was gradually coming out of her lethargy and awakening to the power of the Holy Spirit. The preaching searched out sin and pierced the conscience, presenting Christ as the only hope for the sinner.

## **The Schism of 1741**

The two factions could be identified by their view of revival and subscription to the Confession.

In 1736 the pro-subscriptionist, anti-revival party was in a majority at the meeting of Synod, in part because so many of the Awakeners were carrying on itinerant ministries. The majority seized the opportunity, and modified the Adopting Act to require the adherence to the Westminster Confession without the least variation or alteration.<sup>9</sup>

The revivalist party responded by securing the permission of the synod to form a presbytery along doctrinal lines rather than geographical boundaries. In 1738, they established the New Brunswick presbytery. The following year George Whitefield came to the New World and found affinity with the Tennents and the Log College men.

The Lord prospered the gospel through their preaching, but the rift in the Presbyterian Church was widening. The Log College men came to be known as “The New Side.” Although the revivalists saw their work blessed by the saving of many souls, they began to confuse their work with that of the Holy Spirit. Their preaching was soul searching, directed to the conscience, but at times they went too far in telling men what was in their hearts, a work reserved for the Spirit of God. In 1740 Gilbert Tennent preached a scathing sermon in Nottingham called “The Dangers of an Unconverted Ministry,” in which he denounced ministers

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<sup>9</sup>Robert T. Handy, *A History of the Churches in the United States and Canada* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 81.

who could not give details of their conversion experience. This led to the Schism of 1741 in which the Synod was severely divided into New Side and Old Side factions. Although Tennent's desire was to produce reformation in the church, he was overly zealous in trying to gain that end.

This tragic breach lasted seventeen years. By that time Gilbert Tennent had come to see that his methods had been divisive, and he was just as zealous to produce reconciliation in the church as he had been to cause the difficulties in the first place. In 1749 he wrote *Irenicum Ecclesiasticum, or a Humble, Impartial Essay upon the Peace of Jerusalem*. He also published a lengthy pamphlet of repentance entitled "The Pacificator," in which he urged a reuniting of the two parties. In the Synod of 1758 a plan of union was proposed and unanimously agreed to. The first moderator elected by this united Synod was Gilbert Tennent. He died in 1764.

## **The American Revolution**

In 1768 a 45 year old minister of the Church of Scotland by the name of John Witherspoon emigrated to the New World with his wife. He became president of the College of New Jersey, which took the place of the Log College and later became Princeton University. He held this post until his death in 1794. His Scottish background naturally made him cautious of England and he soon became a supporter of the American Revolution. He was a popular preacher, a defender of liberty, and the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence.

Because of their understanding of covenant theology and Christian liberty, Presbyterians understood the serious nature of the conflict. The Synod of New York and Philadelphia called for a day of prayer and fasting. They drafted a letter which was supportive of the patriot side, but still expressed loyalty to King George III. In the end, Presbyterian pulpits were unanimous in their support of sovereignty and independence for the American states.

Presbyterians were also very diligent to support the cause of religious liberty in this new nation. Building upon the foundation that Frances Makemie had laid some sixty years earlier in New York, they opposed the establishment of any one religion and endorsed a policy of freedom of religion.

## **The First General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America**

In accordance with the national independence that had been declared and a national identity which was being forged, Presbyterians desired to be organized on a national level. The four existing synods (New York and New Jersey, Philadelphia, Virginia, and the Carolinas), consisting of a total of 16 presbyteries, 177 ministers, and 419 churches, combined in 1789 to take as its official name, "The Presbyterian Church in the United States of America."

The Synod of 1788 had amended the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger Catechism to conform to the new American theory of the separation of church and state. The Directory for Worship was almost completely changed. Ministers to be ordained now had to

answer in the affirmative the question: “Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith of this church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures?”

All these measures were adopted by the First General Assembly as it met in May of 1789. John Witherspoon was the convener of this body.

## **The Turn of the Century**

As America entered the nineteenth century, Presbyterians were instrumental in another revival, often called *The Second Great Awakening*. Two prominent men in this work were Archibald Alexander and James McGready. The revival was characterized by “camp meetings,” especially in Kentucky. It did not have many of the excesses that were predominant in the First Great Awakening, and its influence was felt more widely and solidly in its effects. During this time, the way was prepared for Sunday Schools, as well as a stronger emphasis upon home and foreign mission work and the development of colleges and seminaries.

During this time there appears to have been a strong sentiment towards peace and union. Perhaps the church was still thinking of the seventeen years of schism (1741-1758) and recovering from the impact of the Revolutionary War. There was also the positive influence of the revivals of the Second Awakening. Whatever may have been the cause, the Presbyterian Church devised a Plan of Union in 1801 in which a very close working relationship was approved between the Presbyterian and Congregational churches. This plan caused great confusion in both polity and doctrine and resulted in the weakening of the Presbyterian Church.

## **The Bible Presbyterian Church in Light of the First Hundred Years of American Presbyterianism**

Where does the Bible Presbyterian Church stand in relation to the events and actions of these first 100 years? The question may seem anachronistic, considering that the BPC was only formed in 1937. Even though our formation is a product of many doctrinal, historical, and even sociological aspects, it is more than just vain speculation to answer the question.

Generally speaking, the Bible Presbyterian Church has been identified with the New Side of the Schism of 1741. That is a good identification because of the heart-felt application of God’s Word to the sinner as the only hope for his soul. We desire to be delivered from mere formalism and an external show of religion to that Spirit-empowered preaching that touches the heart. We want, not only to preach the truth, but to see the Spirit moving upon the hearts of his elect to excite them to spiritual passion.

At the same time, there is a growing concern for sound doctrine and a faithfulness to the truth of God’s Word which was characteristic of the Old Side. We endeavor to warn against compromise and to be separated from unbelief and apostasy.

Although our works have not been perfect before the Lord, do we not desire to have them perfected in Christ Jesus? Shall we not, in the power of his might, have strength so that we will not bear them that are evil, but labor and not faint, and at the same time remember our first love towards him who first loved us?

The Lord has blessed us with ministers who have strong desires for both doctrinal faithfulness and a gospel obedience to his precepts. May the Lord be pleased to make us more and more faithful to our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ.

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