

A History of Presbyterians in America

By Hunter Brewer

Introduction

In the New Testament, Jesus tells his disciples that he will establish his church and that the gates of hell will not prevail against this institution. Over two thousand years later, the veracity of this claim is substantiated through the many congregations and denominations that make up the Church of Jesus Christ. Numbered among this group of professing believers are those who call themselves Presbyterian.

The word "Presbyterian" comes from the Greek word *presbyteros*, which means "elder." It refers primarily to a church that is governed by elders, who are typically elected by a local congregation or by a group of congregations. Presbyterians believe this form of government is evidenced in the early church, the New Testament (Acts 20:17; Tit. 1:5-7), and the Old Testament (Num. 11).

The Presbyterian Church's roots are traced back to the Protestant Reformation and to such notable figures as John Calvin and John Knox.

Knox was a restless activist who had tried earlier to point England in the direction of Calvinism. Like many others, however, he was forced to flee England overnight when, in 1553, the country returned to the Catholic faith under Henry VIII's daughter, Mary I. The queen's persecution of Protestant leaders earned her the title "Bloody Mary."¹

Knox eventually made his way to Geneva, Switzerland, with other Marian exiles. There, he sat under the preaching and teaching of the famed minister-theologian John Calvin.

In Geneva they set up a congregation ruled by elders and led by two elected pastors... They also adopted a confession of faith, and order of worship, and a form of discipline which followed the teachings of Calvin.²

¹ Shelly, Bruce L. *Church History in Plain Language* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishing, 1995), p. 262.

² Douglas, J.D. *The New International Dictionary of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1978), p. 801.

In 1559, Knox returned to Scotland, which was in the midst of socio-political and religious disarray. His intent was to spread the reforms of Geneva to the people of his homeland. By 1560, The *Lords of the Congregation* (a militant Protestant faction) occupied enough cities in Scotland that the French and English (both anti-Protestant) signed the Treaty of Berwick. Accordingly, they left Scotland, assuring the establishment of Protestantism.

Under [Knox's] leadership the Protestant forces succeeded in having Parliament adopt a Reformed Confession in August 1560, but it did not accept the *Book of Church Discipline* submitted to it until somewhat later, which would have established a Reformed structure of church order. The Reformed church, however, which was now established at least doctrinally, organized itself along lines that under Andrew Melville in the latter part of the century became fully Presbyterian with a hierarchy of courts extending from local sessions through presbytery and synod to the national general assembly."³

Pre-Revolutionary Period

In 1683, Francis Mackemie, an ordained minister, was sent by the Presbytery of Laggan in Ireland to be an evangelist in America at the request of Colonel Stevens of Maryland. Mackemie labored for 25 years in Maryland, Virginia, and Barbados. By the time of his arrival, there were several Presbyterian churches scattered throughout the land. This situation, however, posed a problem because, although Presbyterian in name, the churches functioned independently.

In 1706, "Mackemie called together the ministers of several Presbyterian churches in Maryland, Delaware, and eastern Pennsylvania for the meeting at which the first American presbytery was founded."⁴ The church grew tremendously despite the fact that it was not an official state church, like the Anglicans in Virginia or the Congregationalist in Connecticut. In fact, by 1706, the number of churches in the presbytery had increased to the point that it became a synod with four presbyteries consisting of Long Island, Philadelphia, New Castle, and Snow Hill.

In 1729, this young church found itself entangled in its first major theological debate. European philosophical ideas attributed to Deism were infiltrating the church. The outcome was an outright "rejection of the Bible as the rule of the Christian faith and life, as well as doctrinal standards such as the

³ Douglas, p. 801.

⁴ Lake, Benjamin J. *The Story of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 13.

Westminster Standards and the catechisms.”⁵ Thus, the *Adopting Act of 1729* was approved, which established Jesus and the Bible as the source and rule of the Christian faith. Also, verbal assent was required to *The Westminster Confession of Faith* and *The Larger and Shorter Catechism*.⁶

Twelve years after the Adopting Act, an additional theological problem surfaced among Presbyterians involving the Great Awakening and the Log College, which William Tennent, a Presbyterian minister, had established to train ministers. One side, led by the preaching of Log College graduates, wholeheartedly endorsed the Great Awakening. The other side questioned the revival and the educational standards of Log College graduates, among other things. So, in 1741, the first split occurred in the church between the New Side, who were for the Log College and approved of the Great Awakening, and the Old Side, who were opposed to the Log College and Great Awakening.

The New Side, led by Gilbert Tennent (William’s son) along with the New Brunswick Presbytery, seceded from the Synod and they were soon joined by the Presbyteries of New Castle and New York. Eventually, they became known as the Synod of New York (New Side). The remaining presbyteries that did not secede became the Synod of Philadelphia (Old Side). Over the course of several years, the number of New Side ministers tripled, while the Old Side decreased by one. In 1758, reunification occurred, thus forming the Synod of New York and Philadelphia.

Revolutionary Period

May 17, 1775, was a stirring day in the Presbyterian Synod of New York and Philadelphia, meeting in Philadelphia. In the preceding month the first blood of the Revolution had been shed at Lexington. Early in the same month the Second Continental Congress had assembled in Philadelphia. The whole city and country were seething with excitement. In the distraction of these feverish days only twenty-four ministers and five elders were present. The Synod appointed a day of “solemn fasting, humiliation, and prayer for all congregations.” The Synod also drafted a pastoral letter, which wielded a strong, though restrained, influence for the patriotic side.⁷

⁵ Smylie, James H. *A Brief History of the Presbyterians* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1996), p. 45.

⁶ Jonathan Dickinson, who is sometimes called America’s first theologian, was very instrumental in creating the *Adopting Act*.

⁷ Loetscher, Lefferts A. *A Brief History of the Presbyterians* (Philadelphia: Board of Christian Education of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1938), p. 46.

The Presbyterian Church and its members would play an influential role in the Revolution, perhaps more so than any other church. In fact, British soldiers often referred to the war as the Irish-Scot Rebellion. There were three reasons why this was the case. First, the Presbyterian Church consisted largely of Scottish immigrants who detested the imperial rule of England. Second, the Presbyterian Church symbolized the only form of representative government in the colonies. Third, the Anglican Church, which was so prominent, epitomized the struggle the colonist were facing.

The impact of the Presbyterian Church during this time is probably best represented by John Witherspoon. He was an ordained Presbyterian minister and the only clergyman to have signed the Declaration of Independence. Also, he was James Madison's professor at the Log College. There, he lectured Madison in the tenets of Reformed theology, including the sovereignty of God and sinfulness of man. Undoubtedly, Witherspoon's teaching played a significant role in Madison's thinking as he helped write our *Constitution* and the *Federalist Papers*.

In 1788, just five years after the War for Independence came to a conclusion, the Synod of New York and Philadelphia met in Philadelphia to address long neglected ecclesiastical affairs. This would be the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA). The four subordinate synods were New York and New Jersey, the Carolinas, Philadelphia, and Virginia. At this assembly they

amended *The Westminster Confession of Faith* and *The Larger Catechism* to be agreeable to the new American theory of the separation of Church and State. *The Westminster Directory for Worship of God* was so amended as to become almost a new work. These, together with *The Shorter Catechism*, the *Form of Government*, and the *Book of Discipline*, the latter of which was especially prepared for the occasion by a committee of which John Witherspoon was chairman, were to be the standards of the reorganized church.⁸

Civil War Period

In 1837, the storm of slavery was creeping up on the horizon and casting a long shadow over this nation. One of the first institutions to be enveloped by it was the Presbyterian Church. During this time, two large factions had developed within the church. One group was called the New School. "New Schoolers were exploring fresh ways of expressing their Reformed theology. Many were located

⁸ Loetscher, p. 48.

in New York, in the Midwest, and in border states.”⁹ The New School also supported the Plan of Union.¹⁰ Lastly, many New School adherents in the North were abolitionist.

The Old School was dissatisfied with the Plan of Union of 1801 with the Congregationalist, charging that the Churches erected under the Plan were not truly Presbyterian at all, and that adequate control and discipline of them by church courts was impossible. The Old School also felt that the Presbyterian Church should have its own denominational boards, responsible to the General Assembly, rather than work through such interdenominational agencies as the American Board and the American Home Mission Society.¹¹

Also, many within the Old School were suspicious of the theology of the New School, which was emerging from New England.

At the General Assembly of 1837, the Old School controlled enough votes to have the Synods of Western Reserve, Utica, Geneva, and Genesee removed. Thus, their actions effectively pushed the New School out of the Church.

The next year the commissioners from the excscinded presbyteries presented their credentials, but were refused seats. They organized themselves as a General Assembly and adjourned to another building. Thus the Presbyterian Church presented the strange spectacle of being divided into two almost equal denominations, having the same official name, the same doctrinal standards, the same form of government and worship, and covering about the same territory, yet completely separate and sometimes hostile.”¹²

Throughout this time, the issue of slavery gained momentum. Finally, in 1858, the New School divided over the issue. The New Schoolers in the South formed the United Synod of the Presbyterian Church. Then in May of 1861, the Civil War erupted and lines were quickly drawn. The General Assembly that year passed the Gardiner Springs Resolution, which supported the federal

⁹ Smylie, p. 79.

¹⁰ The Plan of Union of 1801 was a cooperative fellowship with the Congregationalists of Connecticut. The goal was to reach the churches along the frontier in a united spirit. These churches could call either a Presbyterian pastor or Congregationalist pastor. When ecclesiastical affairs needed attention, the church could appeal to a presbytery, or a special council/committee. Many in the New School came out of this Plan. However, many in the Old School felt that this was creating a church within the church, which did not adhere to Presbyterian policy.

¹¹ Loetscher, p. 58.

¹² Loetscher, p. 59.

government. Old School Presbyterians in the South withdrew. They claimed that the Church had decided a political issue¹³ and being sympathetic to slavery, they formed the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America.

With the end of the Civil War, the country was once again united as a nation, but social, economic, and religious division still existed.

In 1865 Southerners – defeated, desolate, yet defiant – organized the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS)... It should be noted that the Old School and New School in the South had reunited in 1864.¹⁴

In the North, the Old School and New School, had cooperated during the war, but did not reunite until 1869, when they formed the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA).

The Twentieth Century

The trend of splitting and reunification would continue as the Presbyterian Church, both PCUS and PCUSA, moved into the new century. In the past, there were disagreements between the New Side and the Old Side, and between the New School and the Old School. However, the debate now was between the modernist (more liberal) and the fundamentalist (more conservative). “Modernism, was a school ... of theology loosely united by the belief that the proper response to modern thought is to make radical alterations in Christian doctrine.”¹⁵ Fundamentalists, on the other hand, rejected this modernistic perspective and closely held to historic doctrinal beliefs.

In 1910, 1916, and 1923, fundamentalists in the PCUSA presented statements to the General Assembly confirming the historic doctrines of inerrancy, the virgin birth of Christ, the atonement, the resurrection of Jesus, and the Second Coming. In response to this, those within the modernist movement signed the Auburn Affirmation, which declared their commitment to modernistic theology.

¹³ I think it is legitimate to say that the Church did decide a political issue in this case, which, according to Romans 13, it must guard against. However, I agree with the Old School in the North that slavery and the Civil War was a case extraordinary.

¹⁴ Smylie, p. 91.

¹⁵ Sinclair Ferguson and David Wright, *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 438.

Differences would continue to grow within the church. In 1925, the moderator of the General Assembly Charles Erdman, a professor at Princeton Seminary, formed a committee to look into this modernist/fundamentalist dispute.

“After a year investigation, the committee reported back to the General Assembly that no traces of liberalism could be found in the denomination and that the cause of the controversy was due to conservatives and sincere Presbyterian ministers.”¹⁶

This report would sound an alarm to conservatives, especially J. Gresham Machen.

Machen, a professor at Princeton Seminary, had been a leader in the conservative movement within the PCUSA. He fought against modernism not only in the Church but at Princeton Seminary. His final fight would be over missions. Believing that the Presbyterian Foreign Missions Board was propagating modernism abroad instead of the gospel, Machen established an Independent Missions Board. In 1936, he was brought up for trial “for insubordination because he was determined to apply the teachings of an infallible Bible to a fallible Church.”¹⁷ Machen and many conservatives eventually left the PCUSA and started the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) in 1936. Carl McIntire would later split from the OPC and start the Bible Presbyterian Church (BPC) in 1938.

In the 1950s, the PCUSA, the PCUS, and the UPCNA¹⁸ made plans to reunite. In 1954, a vote was held, but the PCUS voted it down on the presbytery level because of the PCUSA’s more liberal theological outlook. In 1958, the PCUSA and the UPCNA did unite to form the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA). This action formed the largest Presbyterian denomination in our country.

Another major event in the history of the Presbyterian Church occurred in the 1960’s with the approval, by the UPCUSA, of the *Confession of 1967*. As a result, ministers were no longer required to receive and adopt *The Westminster Confession of Faith* and *The Larger and Shorter Catechisms*; rather, they were to be guided by them. This marked a major shift in Presbyterian polity, both historically and doctrinally. Another important event occurred in 1969 when the UPCUSA and the PCUS moved closer to reunification. An agreement was reached that allowed “some individual presbyteries to belong simultaneously to

¹⁶ Hart, D.G., and John Muether, *Fighting the Good Fight: A Brief History of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: Orthodox Presbyterian Church), p. 24.

¹⁷ Hutchinson, George P. *The History Behind the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod* (Cherry Hill, N.J.: Mack Publishing Co., 1974), p. 215.

¹⁸ See section titled “Other Presbyterian Bodies” below.

the PCUS and the UPCUSA, forming union presbyteries and thus bringing Presbyterians together, especially in the border regions along the Mason-Dixon Line.”¹⁹

The confessional change of 1967 and the partial reunification in 1969 caught the attention of conservatives in the PCUS. Eventually in 1973 a group of disgruntled ministers left the PCUS in order to found a new denomination, which would become known as the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). Their mission was to establish a denomination that would be loyal to Scripture and the historic Reformed tradition, and committed to the spiritual mission of the Church as Christ commanded in the Great Commission.

Dr. Kennedy Smartt, a founding father of the PCA, notes,

By 1971 the state of affairs in the PCUS was so abysmal that many conservatives felt we could not be true to our convictions and remain any longer in the denomination. The ordination vows were watered down by interpretation so that they really didn't have any meaning. The assembly had refused to assert that ordination vows meant subscription to Scriptural inerrancy. And it had approved abortion for socio-economic reasons. The social agenda had replaced evangelism and missions as the primary mission of the church... I repeat many of us felt we had no choice but to leave.²⁰

Another reason many PCUS ministers left to create the PCA was because they feared the eventual reunification with the more liberal UPCUSA. Moreover, it was widely believed that once there was reunification, any church that wanted to leave in order to found a new denomination would probably lose their property.

Eventually, in 1983 the reunification of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA) and the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) did take place. However, this did not occur before a group of conservative ministers in the UPCUSA left in 1981 to form the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC). Furthermore, in 1982, the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod joined the PCA making it the second largest Presbyterian denomination behind the PCUSA.

Conclusion

The Presbyterian Church (all denominations) in the United States boasts a rich heritage. In fact, a Presbyterian church can be found in every part of this

¹⁹ Smylie, p. 136.

²⁰ Smartt, Kennedy. *I Am Reminded* (Chestnut Mountain, GA: self-published, n.d.), p. 56.

great nation. However, it is a church, not unlike the Methodists, Baptists, and Lutherans, which has also had its fair share of controversy, and which continues to experience controversy even to this day. But, the various bodies that call themselves Presbyterians (PCA, PCUSA, OPC, EPC, ARP, etc.) are part of the proof that the gates of hell have not and will not prevail against the Church of Jesus Christ.

Other Presbyterian Bodies

The Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARP) was founded in 1782. It

traces its origin to controversies in the national Presbyterian Church in Scotland in the 18th century, when a group of presbyters seceded from the national church in protest over a number of issues of polity and worship.²¹

Eventually, one group under the leadership of Ebenezer Erskine immigrated to the U.S. This group merged with another secessionist group that had immigrated to the U.S., forming the Associate Reformed Synod in Philadelphia. In 1780,

the Associate Reformed Presbytery of the Carolinas and Georgia was formed in ... South Carolina, followed in 1803 by the division of the entire church into four Synods and one General Synod. In 1822 the Synod of the South was granted separate status, and by the end of the 19th century was the sole remaining body of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, as several mergers over the years had absorbed the rest of the denomination into the old United Presbyterian Church.²²

The United Presbyterian Church (UPC) resulted from the unification of the General Synod of the Associate Reformed Church and the Synod of the Associate Presbyterian Church in 1858. The UPC would unify with the PCUSA in 1958 to form the UPCUSA, as mentioned previously.

The Cumberland Presbyterian Church (CPC) was founded in 1810 by three ministers who objected to certain articles of *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. In 1906, a partial unification occurred with the PCUSA. However, a number of Cumberland Presbyterians, who were unsatisfied with the merger, perpetuated the denomination. The doctrinal standards of the CPC are significantly different from and almost adverse to historic Reformed theology.

²¹ Mead, Frank, and Samuel S. Hill, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), p. 296.

²² Mead, p. 297.

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