

American Presbyterian Church History

IV. The Revolutionary Era

Demographics

1. Approximately 3105 Reformed churches for a population of 3 million
 - a. Spread evenly over the 3 regions of N.E., Middle, and Southern colonies
 - b. Two thirds of population was Calvinistic

2. Denominational proportions:

658 Congregational
543 Presbyterian
498 Baptist
251 German and Dutch Reformed

Backdrop of the Great Awakening

1. The spiritual turning was only one generation removed from the political upheaval
2. The Awakening's influences on Revolutionary thought and action
 - a. A common intellectual and emotional interest
 - (1) Aspiration for a post millennial kingdom

“Many thought it likely that the gospel would now advance by the preaching of the Word and work of the Holy Spirit until the whole world was Christianized.... The conviction that America might be the fountainhead of this last push to the millennium increased as the revival flourished; it did not diminish even when the startling successes had become things of the past.” –(Noll, *Christians in the American Revolution*, p. 41)

To many Americans, the War was a religious crusade. Note Presbyterian Robert Smith's 1781 sermon title: “The Cause of America is the Cause of Christ”

The war was

“...the cause of truth against error and falsehood, ... the cause of pure and undefiled religion, against bigotry, superstition, and human inventions.... In short, it is the cause of heaven against hell—of the kind Parent of the universe against the prince of darkness, and the destroyer of the human race.” –Noll, pp.60,61

“Now, however, with the thrilling prospect of realized liberty [in Christ] and the unique opportunity for virtuous citizens to create their own institutions, it seemed increasingly likely that the millennial age would arise from this struggle for liberty and [for] Christianity in which the colonists were engaged.” –Noll, p. 58

(2) Kindling of democratic ideals

(a) Reassertion of Reformation principle of the individual priesthood of believers directly responsible to God

(b) The Awakening set the tone for antiestablishmentarianism

i) Anglicanism was weakened

ii) Alternatives to dead orthodoxy promoted

iii) Presbyterian Samuel Davies teaches Patrick Hamilton to break the conventions of oratory

(3) Real Whig anthropology

b. Common inter-colonial leaders recognized

c. Interdenominational cooperation

(1) History of cooperation among Reformed branches

(2) Transcendence above sectarian and political lines

The threat of implanting Anglican Bishops on American soil
(see Walton’s Chart #57)

1. Appeared as a specter of religious imperialism to America’s free churches in 1760-70s

a. Opposed most strongly in N.E.

“People have no security against being unmercifully priest-ridden but by keeping all imperious bishops, and other clergymen who loved to lord it over God’s heritage, from getting their feet into the stirrup at all.” – Jonathan Mayhew, Boston minister, cited in Sweet, p. 104

b. Quebec Act of 1774 - RCism given freedom in Quebec

2. Indigent Anglican leaders were calling for it

a. Bishop of London too remote

b. the Anglican church in America now large enough for its own regional bishop

c. Yet the dissident churches were overshadowing the mother church in size and influence

3. Drew Congregationalists and Presbyterians together

b. Annual meetings from 1766

c. Proto-type of Plan of Union

“The grand points to be kept in view, are the promoting religion and the good of the Societies [i.e., Congregationalists and Presbyterians], and a firm union against Episcopal Encroachments.... What we dread is their political power, and their courts, of which Americans can have no notion adequate to the mischiefs that they introduce.” —Erdmans, p. 133

“The Presbyterian Revolution”

“Cousin America has run off with a Presbyterian parson!” —Horace Walpole, M.P.

“Where were Presbyterians to be found in those days of trials, who were willing to hazard their all for the cause of civil and religious liberty? It was for these blessings they sought these shores. First to resist oppression of the king, first to counsel separation from the mother country, first to draft declarations of independence, Presbyterians were not found wanting when the day of trial and conflict came.” —Noble, as cited in McClellan, *A History of Faggs Manor United Presbyterian Church: 1730-1980*, p. 22

1. Official pronouncements

a. Political

(1) 1775 Mecklenburg Resolves, sever ties of Scotch Irish in western N.C. to King George

“All former laws are now suspended in this province and whatever person shall hereafter attempt to exercise any commission from the Crown shall be deemed an enemy of his country.” —Hays, pp. 114-15

(2) May 1776 - Westmoreland County, PA, Scotch Irish determine to defend their property vs. king's officers

b. Ecclesiastical - Synods of NY and Philadelphia

(1) 1775

(a) Call for a boycott of British goods with support of Congress

(b) Appeal to show respect to King George in any overtures to him while maintaining colonial solidarity

(2) Oct. 1776 - Hanover, VA, Presbytery endorses Declaration of Independence as its “Magna Carta”

(3) 1783 Pastoral letter exhorting the churches to “... render thanks unto Almighty God for all his mercies, spiritual and temporal, and in particular manner for establishing the Independence of the United States of America.”

“We cannot help congratulating you on the general and almost universal attachment of the Presbyterian body to the cause of liberty and the rights of mankind. This has been visible in their conduct, and has been confessed by the complaints of the common enemy. Such a circumstance ought not only afford us satisfaction on the review as bring credit to the body in general, but to increase our gratitude to God for the happy issue of the war.” –Breed, *Presbyterians and the Revolution*, p. 127

2. Direct involvement

a. Two thirds of Continental Army is Scotch Irish

b. Preaching in behalf of the sacred cause

“So universal was the patriotic ardor of the Presbyterian ministers that Dr. Inglis, Tory rector of Trinity Church, New York, wrote in 1776, ‘I do not know one Presbyterian minister, nor have I been able, after strict inquiry, to hear of any who did not by preaching and every effort in their power promote all the measures of the Continental Congress, however extravagant.’” –Loetscher, p. 75

c. Promoting the war cause

(1) Chaplains

(2) Recruiting

George Duffield of Philadelphia to his Sunday congregation: ... There are too many men in this church and “...there will be one less tomorrow and no lecture on Wednesday evening.”

(3) Sacrificing

- James Caldwell of Elizabethtown: “Put Watts into ‘em, boys.”

- See Bret Harte’s poem in Hays, pp. 118-19

John Witherspoon (1723-94)

Evangelical leader in the Kirk of Scotland

Finally accepted Presidency of College of NJ, 1768

Political activism (the “Presbyterian Parson”)

1776 - delegate to NJ provincial congress

Applied Presbyterian theories of Genevan Republicanism to the fledgling governments

Was sent as a NJ representative to the Continental Congress (1776-83)

Only educator and/or cleric to sign Declaration of Independence

“There is a tide in the affairs of men, a nick of time. We perceive it now before us. To hesitate is to

consent to our own slavery. That noble instrument upon your table, which ensures immortality to its author, should be subscribed this very morning by every pen in this house. He that will not respond to its accents and strain every nerve to carry into effect its provisions is unworthy the name of freeman. For my own part, of property I have some, of reputation more. That reputation is staked, that property is pledged, on the issue of this contest; and although these gray hairs must soon descend into the sepulchre, I would infinitely rather that they descend thither by the hand of the executioner than desert at this crisis the sacred cause of my country.” —Breed, p. 166

Continental Congress

Confidant of Washington

Served on critical War and Finance Committees

Constitutional Convention

“Calvinism was the driving force in the pursuit of independence, but Presbyterianism was the guiding light in the shaping of the American experiment” —CKL

Sought union with Congregationlists and Dutch Reformed

Influenced key patriots at Princeton

James Madison, the Father of the Constitution

Alexander Hamilton, a potential student

Leader of the Presbyterian National Assembly

Other Reformed Groups

1. Dutch

Near unanimous support of the war effort

Suffered greatly from British occupation

German Reformed

General support of the cause

“Better is a poor and wise child than an old and foolish king who is above admonishment”

French Huguenots - a foregone conclusion

Post-war disestablishment of the churches

Largely through efforts of Baptists, (Isaac Backus) with support of Presbyterians

Presbyterians originally had sought only tolerance; now sought pluralism

“We ask no ecclesiastical establishment for ourselves; neither can we approve of them when granted to others.”
–Hanover Presbytery, cited in Loetscher, p. 75

“The Synod of New York and Philadelphia in 1781 declared: ‘The Synod do solemnly and publicly declare that they ever have and still do, renounce and abhor the principles of intolerance, and we do believe that every peaceable member of civil society ought to be protected in the full and free exercise of their religion.’ This splendid declaration voices the best of Presbyterian and American conviction on the subject of religious freedom.” –Loetscher, p. 76

Virginia takes the lead in disestablishing the state church

Evolution of religious freedom

1776 - religious freedom for all sects

1779 - state funding of Anglican church stopped

1785 - complete disestablishment

Paved way for First Amendment to U.S. Constitution

Organization of the Presbyterian General Assembly

Four years of study and planning

1785 - General Committee headed by Witherspoon to formulate general rules for government of Synods, presbyteries, and churches

1786 - Presbytery and Synod boundaries redrawn

- Witherspoon committee begins drafting a Form of Government and Book of Discipline to be distributed before the next convocation

1787 - Draft amended, adopted, and sent to presbyteries for ratification

1788 - Call for General Assembly to meet the next year

- Adoption of Westminster Standards; amended in areas re: civil magistrate

Simultaneous drafting of U.S. Constitution

Parallels

Anthropology of the framers

Division of labors

Tiered levels of authority

Republican rule by representatives of the people

Circumstantial evidence

Parallel dates of meeting, and only 4 blocks apart in Philadelphia

Common denominator in Witherspoon, the Confidant of Washington

James Madison, the father of the U.S. Constitution, and 8 other U.S. delegates (out of 55) were steeped in Presbyterian philosophy at Princeton

Composition: “The Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.”

Four Synods: NY and NJ, Philadelphia, VA, and the Carolinas

16 Presbyteries; included 3 new Western presbyteries on the frontier: Redstone (PA), Transylvania, and Lexington (KY)

177 ministers (+ 111 probationers)

419 churches

First Assembly - 1789

Convocation address by Witherspoon: I Cor. 3:7

Significant actions

Call for a new “faithful” edition of the Scriptures

a committee was established to cooperate with other denominations to “...revise and correct the proofsheets of Mr. Collins’s edition of the Bible, and to fix upon the most correct edition to be recommended to the printer from which to copy.” –cited in Hays, p. 138

Measures of “sending missionaries to the frontier settlements to form congregations, ordain elders, and administer the sacraments.”

Rules of parliamentary order established

Other national organizations

Dutch Reformed

Crystallized from 1784-92

Translated Dutch Standards into English; adapted them to separation of church and state at same time

German Reformed → “Synod of the Reformed Church in the U.S.”

1787 - Franklin College in Lancaster County = joint effort with Lutherans to train leaders

1789 - Attempt to cut umbilical cord to Amsterdam classis was consummated after three years of silence from Holland

An age of increasing moral decadence

Brutalizing effect of war

“It is impossible to serve Mars and Christ at the same time”—Marquis of Pescara

“I have attended church these fifty years; I have fought the British seven years; I have slept in a tent on the frozen ground with nothing but a blanket to cover me; and I have trod the snow path with bleeding feet nearly naked ... and if Mr. Merrill [the clergyman] needs a fire, let him go to the place where they keep one year round.”—A NH veteran refusing to pay his state ministerial tax, Eerdmans, p. 164

Skepticism in vogue

Deism of Tom Paine: “Age of Reason”

Sympathy for the French Revolution

“If French infidelity had been able to maintain a stable and quiet gov’t in Europe, it would have well-nigh obliterated Christianity in this country.”—Hays, p. 139

See Hays, pp. 140,41, for General Assembly assessment with other views.

See Sweet, pp. 223,23, for Lyman Beecher’s perspective of student days at Yale.