

## **“I WILL SHAKE ALL NATIONS”: THE IMPACT OF PRESBYTERIANISM ON AMERICA**

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During the anniversary of the establishment of the Presbyterian Church in America, it is both proper and prudent that we remember the profound influence Presbyterianism has had on our nation. Its effects on American society began early on in the nation’s history, and continue, we hope, down to this present hour in those Presbyterian bodies that have remained faithful to God’s Word.

*Christian History Magazine* ran an article several years ago, in its fiftieth issue, entitled, “Preaching the Insurrection.” Harry Stout, the author, made this observation:

Over the span of the colonial era, American ministers delivered approximately 8 million sermons, each lasting one to one-and-a-half hours. The average 70-year-old colonial churchgoer would have listened to some 7,000 sermons in his or her lifetime, totaling nearly 10,000 hours of concentrated listening. This is the number of classroom hours it would take to receive ten separate undergraduate degrees in a modern university, without ever repeating a course!

Events were perceived not from the mundane, human vantage point but from God’s. The vast majority of colonists were Reformed or Calvinist[ic], to whom things were not as they might appear at ground level: all events, no matter how mundane or seemingly random, were parts of a larger pattern of meaning, part of God’s providential design. The outlines of this pattern were contained in Scripture and interpreted by discerning pastors.

Thus colonial audiences learned to perceive themselves not as a ragtag settlement of religious exiles and eccentrics but as God’s special people, planted in the American wilderness to bring light to the Old World left behind.<sup>1</sup>

Nowhere was this work more faithfully and regularly carried on than in the Presbyterian churches of colonial America. Presbyterian clergymen could be counted on to bring the truth to bear in the arenas of civil liberty and politics. Their involvement in these issues, and a host of others that encompassed their biblical world view (e.g., education, healthcare, and benevolences), had a long history prior to the influence of Presbyterianism in early America. It stemmed from the conviction that the Word of God requires this kind of stewardship of the believer.

### **Presbyterians and Civil Liberty**

Speaking to the believer's interest in civil liberty, John Witherspoon, the eminent Presbyterian clergyman and educator stated,

There is not a single instance in history, in which civil liberty was lost, and religious liberty preserved entire. If therefore we yield up our temporal property, we at the same time deliver the conscience to bondage.<sup>2</sup>

The cause of liberty as a means to the preservation of religious liberty entered the bloodstream of Presbyterianism at the very outset of its history and has been pumping through it ever since. The man who codified Reformed doctrine, John Calvin, was forced to flee his native France because of his spiritual convictions and the lack of civil and religious liberty that plagued his homeland in the 1500s.

From Calvin and Geneva the stream flowed into the French Huguenot movement, into the national Church of the Netherlands, through John Knox into the life of the people of Scotland. The stream was one commingled of theology and of practice: of theology and a practice very clear and very logical, very orderly and very closely related to each other.<sup>3</sup>

The result of this infusion has been that Calvinism in general, and Presbyterianism in particular, has had an influence upon mankind far beyond what might have been expected. This influence was, at least in part, the result of the early struggles of Presbyterians to free themselves from those forces which prohibited them the liberty to worship God according to his Word and their conscience. Writing in the 1800s, the Scottish Covenanter historian, Robert Simpson, observed,

Our ancestors [the Scottish Presbyterian Covenanters], were eminent alike for their patriotism and their Christianity, and having been so, they have transmitted to us the invaluable boon of freedom, civil and religious. The tree of Liberty, that fair and stately tree that was planted by the hands of a still more remote ancestry, our fathers... watered with their blood, and it has grown, and spread its branches far and wide; and now underneath its goodly boughs it affords a spacious shelter from the scorching heat of persecution and from the storms of tyrannical misrule.<sup>4</sup>

This was the spirit that Presbyterian colonists and settlers brought with them to the New World; and from their footholds on the coast the Presbyterians moved inland and across America, where their influence was felt in every region.

In 1685 a shipload of Presbyterians landed in Raritan Bay in what was known then as East Jersey. They scattered from there across the colony and then founded a congregation in 1692.

Eventually they constituted a very important segment of the population, a fact which was to have considerable bearing on the role played by New Jersey during the Revolutionary War.<sup>5</sup>

Most readers of this journal are familiar with the work and ministry of Francis Makemie in New Jersey and Pennsylvania and Samuel Davies in Virginia. Makemie joined with four other Presbyterian ministers to constitute the first American Presbyterian presbytery in 1706. Ten years later the first general synod met in Philadelphia.

By the eve of the War for Independence, one-third of the congregations in New Jersey alone were Presbyterian.

Samuel Davies was born in Delaware in 1723. His story is worthy of an article in itself. As a result of his work in Virginia and its environs, congregations were educated and strengthened in the faith and it is said that most ministers who followed him into the churches he had ministered in, found themselves among a people who tested their theological knowledge and familiarity with the Confession of Faith and its catechisms.

Though he had so many congregations to care for, and his charge was spread over so wide a territory, he had his eye, as far as possible, upon the spiritual needs of all; and none ever wanted for suitable counsel, or consolation, or help, whom his pastoral attentions could reach. And he never considered himself as stepping aside from his path of duty as a Christian minister, in enlisting vigorously in behalf of his country. In the day of her peril he came up to her help, not as a party-politician, but as a self-sacrificing Christian patriot.<sup>6</sup>

Samuel Doak was the first resident minister in the territory that would become Tennessee. He came from Davies' same presbytery in Virginia. He came to what was then western Carolina to reach the Presbyterians who had settled there.

The Scotch-Irish had been among the earliest settlers in Tennessee, and with them had come Presbyterianism. A strong and determined people twice expatriated, first from Scotland and later from Ireland, they found America the land of hope. Soon after arriving on the eastern shore of Maryland and the Carolinas, major ports of entry, they moved through the seaboard region to possess the frontiers of Virginia and the Carolinas.

Living by wit, rifle, and brain in a crude life full of danger, these strong-willed, well-muscled, courageous people established small Presbyterian congregations almost as steadily as they constructed shelters, cleared the fields and wrested a living from the land. Through these congregations, the Presbyterians gave a religious tone to the settlements, and efforts were made to secure ministers to place on a firmer basis and exert a strong moral influence in the communities.<sup>7</sup>

Doak was also Tennessee's first "and most prominent academician."<sup>8</sup> Samuel Doak was involved in the founding of the first educational institution between the Alleghenies and the Mississippi, Martin Academy, as well as Tusculum and Washington Colleges. Wherever these godly men went their concerns reached beyond the walls of the church, because they perceived themselves to be, based on the teaching of God's Word and tenants of Presbyterian doctrine founded on that Word, Christians living under God in a society, not simply churchmen.

This attitude, ripening in Virginia society, led Robert L. Dabney to write as follows in the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

Here, then, is our first need, if we should save our country: that we shall carry our citizenship in the kingdom of heaven everywhere, and make it dominate over every public act. And next, the Christians of this country must sternly claim, that wicked men shall no longer hold the helm of state.<sup>9</sup>

But, the seeds of this attitude really came from another land and an earlier time. The freedom enjoyed by the people of the United States of America owes its existence, in part, to the Presbyterian heritage of Scotland. Sadly, the memory of that reality is slipping away. This blessed connection is fading with the growing trends in contemporary society and the tendency to make generic the specific actions of a very particular group of people.

## Presbyterians and the American Revolution

Not all Christians and not all denominations were engaged in the battle for American liberty and independence, but Presbyterian Christians were. From the pastors and elders, to the teachers, the mothers and fathers—to almost everyone in the pew, Presbyterians were engaged in the fight in one way or another.

The Presbyterian Church was so involved that it became the special object of British hatred and abuse. England charged the Presbyterian congregations of the middle and lower colonies with seeking to establish a “democratic despotism.”

In his book *Origins of the American Revolution* John C. Miller writes:

To the end, the Churchmen (Anglican clergy), believed that the revolution was a Presbyterian-Congregationalist plot; these bigoted Calvinists, said John Hughes of Pennsylvania, were “ripe for open rebellion, when they poisoned the minds of the people enough” and pulled together “forty thousand cut-throats” to fall upon the Episcopalians. Hughes reported that they were “as adverse to kings, as they were in the days of Cromwell,” and that as early as 1766, some had begun to cry out, “No king but King Jesus.” But their true purpose, he believed, was to form a “Republican Empire in America, being Lords and Masters themselves.”<sup>10</sup>

What Hughes failed to see, but Presbyterians knew then and still believe, is that there are, as Andrew Melville said of Scotland, “two kings and two kingdoms”<sup>11</sup> in every nation. The supreme authority in any nation is the great Governor of the Nations and all human government falls under that authority as a subordinate tool by which God either blesses or corrects his people and all mankind.

A. A. Hodge, a quintessential Presbyterian theologian, said this:

The present providential Governor of the physical universe and “Ruler among the nations” is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews, to whose will all laws should be conformed, and whom all nations and all rulers of men should acknowledge and serve. “Rev. 19:16 And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.” The proximate end for which God has ordained magistrates is the promotion of the public good, and the ultimate end is the promotion of His own glory.<sup>12</sup>

So closely was the American Revolution tied to the Presbyterian Church that it was reported in the British Parliament that the “Cousin America” had “run off with a Presbyterian Parson” (meaning John Witherspoon). Even King George referred to the matter as “that Presbyterian Parson’s war.” He said this, in part, because so many of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were graduates of the Presbyterian-founded College of New Jersey, which later would become Princeton University.

Two-hundred and thirty Princeton graduates and students fought in some capacity during the war and many others served in various positions in the civil government. This may seem like a small number, but at the time the College of New Jersey was graduating just 19 men a year compared to Harvard’s 35.

Just how deeply American Presbyterianism affected the infancy of the United States was reflected in the treatment that Presbyterian congregations and churches received at the hands of “Cousin Britain.” Repercussions were not long in coming. “British troops on Long Island burned Witherspoon in effigy and as they marched through New Jersey they singled out the Presbyterian churches for desecration and destruction.”<sup>13</sup> Some of the churches were simply burned to the ground, others were looted, and some were turned into jails. On occasion, the pews were chopped up for firewood and the auditoriums used for stables or to store manure.

The Reverend James Caldwell, who is legendary for crying, “Now boys, give them Watts!” while tearing the pages out of his congregation’s hymnbooks so that the American troops would have the wadding they needed for their cannons, was reacting at the moment to the fact that earlier a British soldier had murdered his wife simply because she was a “Presbyterian parson’s bride.”

## **Presbyterianism’s Continuing Impact**

So far-reaching and so profound has been the influence of Presbyterianism in our national culture that it even had an impact in what might be termed unlikely places. Take for example this excerpt from a work on the history of United States military uniforms by quartermaster and Congressional Medal of Honor recipient, Captain Oscar Long:

Not long after the commencement of the Revolutionary War and the organization of the American Army, blue became the prescribed color for coats. The reason assigned for the adoption of this color is that it had always been the insignia of the Whigs, the

Covenanters having adopted that color from the history of the ancient Israelites, who were enjoined to put upon the fringe of their garments a ribbon of blue.<sup>14</sup>

The Presbyterian church has, as a rich part of its heritage, a history of faithfulness to the truth of God's Word, a biblical system of government that influenced the formation of our own civil government, a sound theology, and a commitment to freedom and liberty, all of which naturally manifests itself in those who, by the grace of God, have had the blessing of seeing these principles and truths preserved among them.

In those Presbyterian circles where biblical principles, the Westminster Confession of Faith, and Scripture itself have all been given up in favor of humanism, socialism, pacifism, and non-judgmentalism, the church has grown impotent and nothing more than another soundless voice preaching in the wind. But where Presbyterians have stood solidly on biblical principles, have maintained the doctrines of the Confession, and hold the Word of God as the only infallible and inerrant rule of faith and practice, they still have an influence beyond their seemingly small numbers and popularity.

John Witherspoon taught a generation of American leaders and served in the Continental Congress. As a Presbyterian leader and a man who helped to shape the nation he taught that

It is in the man of piety and inward principle, that we may expect to find the uncorrupted patriot, the useful citizen, and the invincible soldier,—God grant that in America true religion and civil liberty may be inseparable and that the unjust attempts to destroy the one, may in the issue tend to the support and establishment of both.<sup>15</sup>

And we might add to his prayer that God would continue to use the faithful Presbyterian churches of the land to broadcast true faith and to produce men and women of piety and inward principle—uncorrupted patriots and useful citizens.

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<sup>1</sup> Harry Stout, "Preaching the Insurrection," *Christian History Magazine* (April 1996).

<sup>2</sup> John Witherspoon, "The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men" *Ashbrook Center for Public Affairs at Ashland University, 2006* (Ashland University, 21 Aug, 2006); online at <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=597>.

<sup>3</sup> George Hedley, *The Christian Heritage in America* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), 41.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Simpson, *Traditions of the Covenanters or Gleanings Among the Mountains* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication), 3:8.

<sup>5</sup> Wallace N. Jamison, *Religion in New Jersey: A Brief History*, Vol. 13 of *The New Jersey Historical Series* (Princeton, N.J.: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc.), 18.

<sup>6</sup> Howard Griffith, comp., *Sermons of the Rev. Samuel Davies* (Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1993), 29.

<sup>7</sup> Herman A. Norton, *Religion in Tennessee 1777-1945* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Robert L. Dabney, *Discussions* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle Publications, 1982), Vol. 2.

<sup>10</sup> John C. Miller, *Origins of the American Revolution* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1943).

<sup>11</sup> Thomas McCrie, *The Life of Andrew Melville*.

<sup>12</sup> A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith: A Handbook of Christian Doctrine Expounding the Westminster Confession* (Reprinted; London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1964), 295.

<sup>13</sup> Jamison, *Religion in New Jersey*, 13:60.

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<sup>14</sup> Oscar F. Long, *Changes in the Uniform of the Army 1774-1895* (U.S. Army Quartermaster's Dept., 1895).

<sup>15</sup> William J. Federer, *America's God and Country: Encyclopedia of Quotations* (Coppell, Tex.: FAME Publishing, Inc., 1994), 703.