

On Being Presbyterian
Chapter 10 - “Errand into the Wilderness: Early American Presbyterianism”

“Shortly after the Westminster Assembly completed its work, Presbyterians started showing up in the New World.” (169)

Scots and Scots-Irish in Middle Atlantic states

English in New England (originally Congregationalists)

Some early churches: Jamaica Presbyterian Church (Long Island) – 1672

First Presbyterian Church (Philadelphia) – 1698

Various churches in northern Virginia – 1699

Francis Makemie (“the father of American Presbyterianism)

- born in Ireland around 1658
- ordained as missionary by Irish Presbytery of Laggan in 1682
- landed in America in 1683, traveling widely
- settled in Accomac, Virginia; managed mercantile business; planted churches
- formed 1st presbytery in America (Philadelphia – March 1706); 7 ministers
- jailed for 3 mos. by Lord Cornbury of NY for preaching w/o a license; his acquittal advanced cause of religious freedom
- died in 1708

1716 – Now 25 ministers. Philadelphia Presbytery created a synod to oversee three presbyteries (Philadelphia [Pennsylvania], New Castle [Maryland and Delaware], Long Island [New York and New Jersey]). The synod did *not* adopt a doctrinal standard at its founding.

1720’s: Subscription Controversy

After synod dealt leniently with a pastor found guilty of immorality (1721), a debate ensued when George Gillespie of New Castle Presbytery proposed the Scottish practice of requiring office-bearers to subscribe to the the Westminster Standards as a method to ensure sound theology in the ministry. John Thomson led the pro-subscription side of the debate, while Jonathan Dickinson (minister in New Jersey) led the anti-subscriptionist side. The two sides of the debate were roughly divided according to the geographical background of the participants:

Pro-subscription: Scots-Irish (stress on doctrinal standards for common faith)

Anti-subscription: England and New England (stress on conversion and religious experience)

Adopting act of 1729

In the end, compromise prevailed over ideology and partisanship. The Adopting Act of 1729, crafted primarily by Dickinson, distinguished between the essential and nonessential components of the Westminster standards. Any minister or ministerial candidate who had reservations about the Westminster articles was required to state his scruples at the time of his subscription. The presbytery would

then judge whether or not the scruple could be resolved within the broader outlines of Westminster theology. (Balmer & Fitzmier, *The Presbyterians*, 26-27)

The Great Awakening

Presbyterian reaction to the Great Awakening – especially the preaching of George Whitefield – roughly followed the division of the subscription controversy. Those of Scots-Irish background were generally critical of what they saw as the excesses and irregularities of the revivalists, while those with a New England background were generally pro-revival.

New England Congregational churches had a tradition of pastoral training by apprenticeship – a method embraced by William Tennent, Sr. and his “Log College” in Pennsylvania. His son, Gilbert Tennant, became a leading Presbyterian advocate of the revival (after being influenced by Dutch pietists), and he was particularly critical of anti-revival Presbyterians. [1740 sermon: “The Danger of an Uncovered Ministry”]

1738 – Synod votes to require all ministerial candidates to have degrees from an Old World College or Harvard or Yale

1741 – Old Side/New Side Split

Old Side Presbyterians critical of revivalist influence (stressed strict doctrinal subscription)

New Side Presbyterians pro-revival (stressed piety and need for specific conversion experience: conviction by law → experience of spiritual rebirth → reformed life w/evidence of practical piety)

New Side ministers forced out of Synod in 1741 and established the New Brunswick Presbytery and, in 1745, the Synod of New York. Their forces grew (while Old Side forces shrunk), and the New Side established a new educational institution. The College of New Jersey held its first classes in the home of its first president, Jonathan Dickinson, in 1747. He was succeeded by Aaron Burr, Sr. who led move to Princeton in 1756. After Burr’s death, his father-in-law, Jonathan Edwards, succeeded in a presidency that lasted just six weeks before he died from complications after a smallpox inoculation. Princeton College (and later Theological Seminary) would become chief Presbyterian educational institution in the nation.

Mid-18th century was a period of rapid growth for Presbyterians

1740 – about 95 congregations

1780 – nearly 500 congregations

1749 – William Tennent began working for reunion of two sides, writing *Irenicum Ecclesiasticum; or, A humble impartial essay upon the peace of Jerusalem*.

1758 – Reunion of Old Side/New Side Presbyterians

[A]fter a long sequence of negotiations, the two synods agreed to meet simultaneously in Philadelphia, where on 29 May 1758, following several

conciliatory sermons, both sides adopted the Plan of Union hammered out by representatives of the two parties. Thus was born the Synod of New York and Philadelphia. The compromise settlement endorsed the Awakening as a work of God, while acknowledging revival excesses; it allowed some latitude in the acceptance of the Westminster standards; and it affirmed that the powers of ordination lay with the presbyteries. (Balmer & Fitzmier, *The Presbyterians*, 32)

1759 – Samuel Davies, Virginia Presbyterian pastor, succeeds Jonathon Edwards as president of College of New Jersey (Princeton). He died 18 months later.

1761 – Samuel Finley, Maryland Presbyterian pastor, succeeds Davies. Serves until his death five years later.

1768 – John Witherspoon, Scottish Presbyterian pastor, persuaded to come to the colonies and succeed Finley as president of the College of New Jersey.

His Scottish Presbyterian background and his comprehensive knowledge of continental Reformed theology (both of which were Old Side shibboleths, and both of which would become highly valued theological benchmarks among subsequent generations of Princetonians) plus his reputation for warm-hearted piety (the chief concern among New Side partisans) uniquely qualified Witherspoon to mitigate remaining Old Side-New Side animosities and to recast colonial Presbyterianism along traditional lines. (Balmer & Fitzmier, *The Presbyterians*, 33)

Witherspoon:

- revolutionized Princeton, introducing Scottish Common Sense Realism as its philosophical foundation.
- supported rising protest against British colonial practices.
- served in Continental Congress from 1776 – 1782.
- was only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence.
- Twice elected to New Jersey state legislature and helped draft New Jersey state constitution in 1787.
- Led reorganization of American Presbyterian church into 16 presbyteries, 3 synods, and 1 delegated General Assembly.

1788 – First Book of Church Order published

1789 – First General Assembly meets in Philadelphia