

TURNING POINTS IN AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN HISTORY PART 4: A NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, 1789

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With political independence for the nation came the opportunity for greater stability within the church. When in 1789 the first General Assembly convened in Philadelphia, it held out the promise of a more uniform and well-organized Presbyterian ministry to the new republic. It named itself the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (PCUSA). At that time, it consisted of 419 congregations, 111 licentiates, 177 ministers, sixteen presbyteries, and four synods (Philadelphia, New York and New Jersey, Virginia, and the Carolinas).

Indicative of the affinities between the new nation and the PCUSA was the election of John Witherspoon to be the moderator of the first General Assembly. He was notable for being the only minister to sign the Declaration of Independence. A native Scotsman, he had been a prominent leader in the so-called evangelical party in the Kirk. His defense of the faith came to the attention of the trustees of the College of New Jersey (later called Princeton University), who in 1768 called him to be president of the institution. In that position, Witherspoon became a significant mediator of the Scottish Enlightenment to the American colonists. One of his students was James Madison, the fourth president of the United States.

Witherspoon's critique of British imperialism and his defense of a republican form of government qualified him to hold public office, first as a member of the New Jersey state legislature, then as a member of Congress (while also presiding over the Princeton school). Presbyterian and Congregationalist ministers supplied much of the intellectual support for political independence among the major Protestant denominations, yet he alone emerged as a ministerial member of the nation's Founding Fathers. His election as moderator of the first General Assembly was a fitting recognition of his public service.

As much as the Presbyterian Church's mission appeared to be bound up with the cause of the American nation during the 1780s, the formation of a national church was also the logical response to the new political realities. Other Reformed communions, such as the Reformed Church in America (Dutch) and the German Reformed Church, also used the new political autonomy of the United States to form denominations that were no longer tied to, or governed by, their Old World mother churches.

The advantages of American ecclesiastical autonomy were obvious. American churches could respond more directly to American conditions without having to gain European approval. Even though the Presbyterians who launched the first General Assembly had never belonged officially to the Scottish Kirk, the principle was still the same. An autonomous national church would more easily handle the responsibilities and needs of Presbyterian churches throughout the nation, not to mention the administrative convenience of following the laws and policies of one national government.

With the formation of the General Assembly also came formal readjustments in the Presbyterian Church's constitution. Prior to the first Assembly, the Synod of New York and Philadelphia as early as 1785 had called for revisions to the Confession of Faith and Catechisms, the Form of Government

and Discipline, and the Directory for Public Worship. Of the changes made to the various documents that were adopted as the church's constitution, the revision of the Westminster Confession was arguably the most significant—even though it is the least studied aspect of the first Assembly.

The substance of the revision was to reformulate the Westminster Divines' teaching on the civil magistrate. The Westminster Assembly had been called by Parliament, and its affirmations about the role and function of the government, especially in ecclesiastical matters, reflected a situation in which the state exerted control over the church as part of the price of religious establishment. The American revision of 1787-1789 took into account the new situation in the United States, where the state had no authority over the church.

The most notable revisions were made in the chapters on the civil magistrate and synods and councils in the Confession of Faith. In the original version of chapter 23, the Divines declared that "for the better effecting whereof, [the civil magistrate] has the power to call synods, to be present at them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God" (23.3). Reverence for George Washington aside, the prospect of giving him the power to call an assembly or synod did not make much sense by 1789. So the American revision changed that section to assert that civil magistrates, as "nursing fathers," had the duty "to protect the church of our common Lord, without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest, in such a manner that all ecclesiastical persons whatever shall enjoy the full, free, and unquestioned liberty of discharging every part of their sacred functions, without violence or danger" (23.3). Gone was the power of the state to convene an assembly and the duty to insure that such church bodies conducted their business "according to the mind of God."

Furthermore, the American revision went on to affirm the principle of religious freedom and asserted that the civil magistrate had a duty to protect that liberty, even including the freedom of infidels: "It is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the person and good name of all their people, in such an effectual manner as that no person be suffered, either upon pretense of religion or of infidelity, to offer any indignity, violence, abuse, or injury."

American Presbyterians undertook a similar revision in chapter 31 on synods and councils. Here they deleted entirely section 2 from the original version, which gave further direction to civil magistrates about their participation in ecclesiastical assemblies. The civil magistrate was mentioned in the revised chapter only in paragraph 4 (old number 5), which now stated that the church is not to "handle or conclude" any matter of civil polity, except for "cases extraordinary," to satisfy the conscience of the church, or to comply with a request from the civil magistrate.

Some critics of the American revision have seen in these changes an occasion of the Presbyterian Church aping the new religious politics of the United States. To be sure, these revisions corresponded directly to the relatively novel arrangement of religious disestablishment; not since Constantine had Christianity been out of power in the West. At the same time, the revision of the Confession and the reduction of the civil magistrate's power over the church was entirely in line with any number of Presbyterian efforts going back to the Covenanters in seventeenth-century Scotland, the Seceders in the eighteenth century, and again the Free Church, which left the Scottish Kirk in the 1840s. In each of these cases, a fundamental point of debate was whether Christ alone was head of the church or whether the church needed to submit as well to the civil magistrate.

The 1789 revision of the Westminster standards stripped the state of any authority over the church beyond that of seeking its freedom from hostile interference. Although this revision did raise important questions about the responsibility of the church in the public realm, the clear meaning of the revised Confession was to remove the powers of the civil magistrate over the church that had been previously granted by ecclesiastical establishment.

The irony was that by affirming the independence of the church from state authority, the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. actually moved more in the direction of being an American, as opposed to a Presbyterian, communion. With its newfound autonomy, a freedom to let the church be the church, the Presbyterian Church could well have used the situation to develop fully all the implications of Presbyterian government, theology, and worship. Eventually some would, such as the Old School Presbyterians during the middle decades of the nineteenth century, who cultivated a Presbyterian identity far richer than that of the European churches that were still part of the ecclesiastical establishment and so subservient to the state.

But instead, the revision, accompanied as it was by the euphoria over political liberty, encouraged excessive loyalty to the new nation, and that eventually eroded its Presbyterian identity. The very name of the new church spoke to this reality—"the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A." This was *the* Presbyterian denomination of *the* United States. Consequently, although the War of Independence and religious disestablishment presented the church with a new opportunity for ministry free from state oversight, the process of so closely identifying with that war and its political ideals yielded a Presbyterian Church intent upon ministering in the state's service.

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