

## **TURNING POINTS IN AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN HISTORY PART 2: ORIGINS AND IDENTITY, 1706-1729**

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American Presbyterianism officially began in 1706, when the Presbytery of Philadelphia held its first meeting. But some accounts of the Presbyterian Church in the New World speak of Presbyterian congregations going back into the seventeenth century.

For instance, several churches on Long Island trace their origins back to the 1640s. The very first Presbyterian minister in New York was Francis Doughty, a New England Puritan who in 1642 came to New York because of differences over the practice of infant baptism. Doughty represents the dominant strain of Presbyterianism north of Pennsylvania. It was heavily influenced by, and oriented toward, Puritanism and its practical brand of Christian devotion. In fact, New York's earliest Presbyterian congregations in eastern Long Island originated when Puritans migrated from New England into the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam in search of greater prosperity.

The most obvious difference between Puritanism and Presbyterianism had to do with church government. As Congregationalists, Puritans located the power of decision making in the local congregation's officers. Presbyterians, in contrast, delegated church power to the presbytery, a regional and representative body of officers from surrounding congregations. Without a presbytery, the Puritan congregations that preferred Presbyterian to Congregational church polity could not technically be Presbyterian. For this reason, when American Presbyterians celebrate their tercentenary in 2006, they will be remembering the date of the first meeting of a presbytery—in 1706.

The date that church historians use for American Presbyterianism's origin is actually of some relevance to the question of Presbyterian identity in Colonial America. When the Presbytery of Philadelphia met, its members came from two different backgrounds. One was the strain of Presbyterianism found among English Puritans, although only one Philadelphia minister, Jedediah Andrews, fit that profile. The most dominant strain was Scottish or Scotch-Irish Presbyterianism. Four of the original ministerial members of the presbytery hailed directly from Scotland, and the other three were from Northern Ireland. The most prominent of the Scotch-Irish was Francis Makemie (1658-1708), the so-called father of American Presbyterianism. He was born in Northern Ireland, graduated from the University of Glasgow, and ministered in his native land before coming to the Colonies and laboring in various congregations on the Eastern seaboard, from Maryland to New York. Makemie was the first moderator of the Presbytery of Philadelphia, and he became the leader of the Presbyterians partly because he defended the rights of Presbyterians like himself to minister without a license, even though Presbyterianism had no official standing in the Colonies.

Makemie's defense of religious liberty has been a source of pride among American Presbyterians. But as much as his arguments would later become part of the American ideology of religious toleration, his labors also revealed American Presbyterianism's humble origins. The theological descendants of John Calvin and John Knox did not arrive in the New World with vast resources and influential connections. Unlike Anglicanism and Congregationalism, Presbyterianism had no state support in the New World.

This explains in part why Philadelphia has been the traditional capital of Presbyterianism in the United States. The colony established by William Penn granted religious liberty to a variety of persecuted believers, Presbyterians among them. In fact, Presbyterianism in Scotland would not rebound from English-Scottish rivalries to become the national kirk until 1690, thus making American Presbyterianism only seventeen years younger than its European sibling. For the Presbyterian church to gain a foothold in America required the goodwill and kind assistance of Pennsylvania Quakers. Scottish and Scotch-Irish immigration to the New World brought Presbyterians primarily to the middle colonies, especially southeastern Pennsylvania. By 1716, the date of the first Synod (Philadelphia), four presbyteries had been established: Philadelphia, New York, New Castle (Delaware), and Snow Hill (Maryland).

Because presbyteries were established first, not synods or general assemblies, American Presbyterianism is characterized by the power of presbytery. The American church, unlike its Scottish analogue, has delegated greater power to presbyteries than to higher courts. This is particularly evident in ordination, where presbyteries still enjoy remarkable autonomy in calling men to the ministry. This feature of American Presbyterianism may reflect sound polity and good theology, but it is also an accident of history. One of the reasons for forming a presbytery in Philadelphia in 1706 was to license and ordain men for the gospel ministry. Ever since then, presbyteries in America have been jealous to guard that prerogative.

The ethnic composition of the early churches and presbyteries had a significant impact on the development of American Presbyterianism. Although the Presbytery of Philadelphia was overwhelmingly Scottish and Scotch-Irish, the same being true for the Presbytery of New Castle, the English Puritan strand of Presbyterianism was also present from the beginning. Its center of strength was in New York and northern New Jersey, and its approach to the Presbyterian faith was at times markedly different from that of the Scotch-Irish element.

The strain between these two groups first appeared in the 1720s during the debates about subscription. Prior to the Adopting Act of 1729, Presbyterianism in America lacked a constitution and coherent order. Consequently, standards for ordination varied. As early as 1724, the Presbytery of New Castle began requiring ministers to subscribe to the Westminster standards, which followed Old World practice. John Thomson (1690-1753), a Scotch-Irish Presbyterian, argued for creedal subscription as something fully within the power that Christ delegated to the church, and as one way of restraining erroneous views. Presbyterians of Puritan background, however, resisted subscription because it smacked of ecclesiastical tyranny. Jonathan Dickinson (1688-1747), a Massachusetts native who ministered in New Brunswick, New Jersey, argued that subscription conflicted with liberty of conscience, and that the way to prevent error from harming the church was to examine candidates thoroughly.

These competing views of subscription informed the Synod of Philadelphia's decision in 1729 to adopt the Westminster standards as the confessional basis for office holders. Their Adopting Act appears to be a compromise document. On the one hand, it states the need "to take care that the faith once delivered to the saints be kept pure and uncorrupt among us." All ministers were required to "declare their agreement in, and approbation of" the Westminster standards. On the other hand, the Act limited subscription to "all essential and necessary articles" of the Confession of Faith and catechisms. Ever since then, American Presbyterians have disputed the meaning of "essential and

necessary." Some have argued for strict subscription, while others have taken those words to allow some flexibility.

In the second part of the Adopting Act, the Synod of Philadelphia appears to have tried to clarify which parts of the standards were not "essential and necessary." Here the body referred to the Westminster Confession's teaching on the civil magistrate in chapters twenty and twenty-three, particularly the state's power over synods, as doctrines which ministers could reasonably scruple. But if the Synod's intention was to clarify this matter, it failed, because Presbyterians have been divided over the nature of subscription ever since then.

During their first twenty-five years in the New World, American Presbyterians struggled to form a church that was Reformed according to the Word of God. Almost three hundred years later, American Presbyterians eager for encouragement would be glad to know that their ecclesiastical tradition's origins in North America were noble, heroic, and magnificent.

However, the heroes produced by the Colonial church were not the legends of church history. Instead, they were men who labored in obscurity and under difficult circumstances. Even the major accomplishments of the American church during those years were less than dazzling. The first presbytery was a modest body of ministers struggling to carve out a Presbyterian witness in a religiously diverse environment. Moreover, the Adopting Act of 1729 sent a mixed signal about the nature of creedal subscription. Instead of adding up to a story of Presbyterian triumph, the origins of American Presbyterianism reinforce the truth that the history of the church on this side of glory is not marked by might and glory, but by militancy and strife.

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