

## From the Old Country to the First Great Awakening

### Why study the history of Presbyterian Christianity in America?

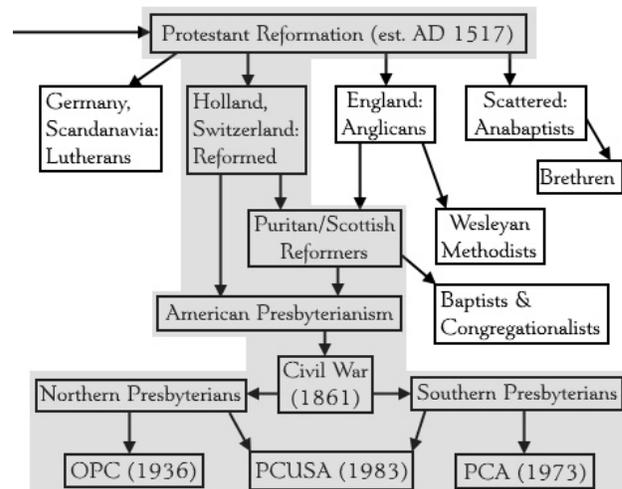
- It is the story of our branch of the Christian family, however extended and however dysfunctional.
- In light of Jesus' prayer for Christian unity (Jn. 17:20-23), every denomination bears a certain "burden of proof": what reasons do we have for existing as a separate denomination?
- Historical amnesia is dangerous: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."
- On the other hand, understanding our history will actually help us understand better our Reformational/Presbyterian family – since today's emphases and tensions arise from yesterday's history.

### Acknowledgement

- Our lessons in this class summarize material drawn from D.G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking a Better Country: 300 Years of American Presbyterianism* published by P&R in 2007 (hb) 2018 (pb).

### Where did 'Presbyterianism' come from originally?

- In 1560, John Knox (who had studied in Geneva with John Calvin) persuaded Scotland's Parliament to abolish the authority of the pope, prohibit the celebration of mass, and approve a new confession of faith – the *Scots Confession*.
- In 1564, the Scottish Church produced a *Book of Common Order* to facilitate Word-based worship and church government by elders.
- In the 1640s, these original documents were superseded by the *Westminster Confession* and *Catechisms*, the *Directory for Public Worship*, and the *Form of Presbyterial Church Government*.
- In 1689-90, the British government officially established a (Presbyterian) Church of Scotland.



### What does 'Presbyterianism' mean?

- Presbyterianism is a branch of Protestantism that embraces biblical Reformation not just for our theology of *salvation*, but also for our theology of *worship* and our theology of *church government*.

### How did Presbyterianism get to North America?

- Presbyterianism immigrated to America in roughly 3 streams: Covenanters, Seceders, and 'Orphans'.
- 'Covenanters' and 'Seceders' were Scottish Presbyterians separate from the official Church of Scotland. Even after coming to America, they remained separate, continuing thus today: the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA) and Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARPC)
- Unlike the Covenanters and Seceders, many Scottish and Scots-Irish Presbyterian immigrants came to the American colonies without any support from a mother church, and without any 'patronage' from colonial governments – which governments were often controlled by Episcopalians or Congregationalists.
- The first Presbyterian church in America was organized in 1662 in Jamaica (now in Queens, NYC).

### How did these 'orphan' Presbyterians get organized?

- In 1683, an Ulster (northern Irish) Presbyterian minister named Francis Makemie came to Maryland.
- Makemie established churches in the Chesapeake region, recruiting other ministers to help.
- This could be dangerous; Makemie spent 5 months jailed in NYC for leading 'underground' services!
- Yet by 1706, the first presbytery – the Presbytery of Philadelphia – was organized by seven ministers.

**How did this distinctively American Presbyterianism grow in the first half of the 1700s?**

- The most significant factor in growth during these years was immigration from Great Britain.
- As it grew, the Presbytery of Philadelphia spun off 2 daughter presbyteries: New Castle and Long Island.
- In 1717, these 3 presbyteries reorganized themselves under a ‘Synod’ (super-presbytery) of Philadelphia.
- In less than 25 years, by 1729 the number of Presbyterian pastors had sextupled – from 7 to 43!

**How did such rapid growth affect American Presbyterianism?**

- The influx of new growth in American Presbyterianism coalesced into three distinct ‘flavors’:

“Experiential”	“Theological”	“Transformational”
Emphasized the importance of intense, personal Christian experience. Tended to be less formal and more subjective.	Emphasized the importance of correct doctrine and organized churches. Tended to be less individualistic and more formal.	Emphasized the Puritan hope of a “city on a hill” that would bring Christian renewal to all of society.

- These emphases are still all very much alive and active in Reformational and Presbyterian churches today!
- *Questions:* 1) Are these emphases mutually exclusive?  
2) What tensions could arise between these emphases?

**What tensions emerged as the different ‘flavors’ within American Presbyterianism mingled?**

- The issue of “creedal subscription”:
  - *The question:* Should church officers be bound by a written statement of faith other than the Bible?
  - At the time, both opinion and practice varied – even in Presbyterian circles:
    - From 1690, the Church of Scotland required subscription to the Westminster Standards.
    - Yet among Presbyterians in Northern Ireland, only some presbyteries required subscription.
    - Many ministers had grown up in New England Congregational churches without subscription.
  - Without a clear precedent to follow, Presbyterian opinion was divided. Proponents of subscription believed it would prevent error. Opponents believed it would be disruptive and divisive.
  - In 1729, the Synod of Philadelphia adopted something of a compromise: all present and future pastors would be required to adopt the Westminster Standards “as being in all the *essential and necessary articles*, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine.”
- Responses to the phenomena of the First Great Awakening:
  - In the late 1720s-1730s, Experiential Presbyterians were rejoicing at the outbreak of numerous local and regional revivals. Then in 1739-41, George Whitefield arrived and itinerated throughout the colonies – effectively ‘nationalizing’ the revivals into a widespread “Great Awakening.”
  - While all Presbyterians rejoiced in the genuine conversions occurring, the Theological Presbyterians were frustrated by how itinerating pastors disrupted local church ministry. They also found some of the itinerant ministers’ preaching “highly emotional and theatrical,” and potentially manipulative.
  - In March 1740, the talented Experiential pastor Gilbert Tennent preached “The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry” – in which he compared critics of revival to Pharisees, Jannes, and Jambres.
  - This led to bitter infighting and ultimately split the Presbyterian churches – which divided in 1745 into the “New Side” Synod of New York and the “Old Side” Synod of Philadelphia.
  - Yet by 1749, even Gilbert Tennent had witnessed excesses he could not abide. That same year he preached another sermon in which he recanted his extremism and called for reunion. When the two Synods finally reunited in 1758 (almost a decade later!), he was elected its moderator.
- *Questions:* 1) How do the tensions on these two issues illustrate different ‘flavors’ of Presbyterianism?  
2) What lessons can we learn from these events for our own days?