

American Presbyterian History

1. Initial Beginnings

- a. There are various reports of independent church plants with presbyterian convictions and ideals in the 17th century. Examples include:
 - i. Several churches on Long Island from the 1640s, some in New Jersey and Maryland in 1670-80s, some in Pennsylvania and Delaware in 1690s.
 - ii. First known presbyterian minister in New York was **Francis Doughty**, a New England Puritan, who came in 1642.
 - iii. **Matthew Hill** was a presbyterian minister in Maryland starting in 1669, known in part for his passionate letter sent to back to Richard Baxter asking him to advocate for more reformed pastors to come to America to help.
- b. Unlike some other church plants, there was no official mother church from Europe, nor official ecclesiastical connection, of these congregations at that time.
- c. Thus, by definition, it would be hard to call these churches actually presbyterian.

2. Formal Beginnings

- a. American Presbyterianism officially began in 1706, when the **Presbytery of Philadelphia** formed and held its first meeting. Francis Makemie was its first moderator.
- b. The first Synod, **Synod of Philadelphia**, was established in 1716 with four presbyteries: Philadelphia, New York, New Castle (Delaware), and Snow Hill (Maryland).
- c. The famous **Adopting Act of 1729** solidified the doctrinal standards and order for the young denomination.
 - i. “All the Ministers of this Synod now present, except one, that declared himself not prepared... after proposing all the scruples that any of them had to make against any articles and expressions in the Confession of Faith and Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, have unanimously agreed in the solution of those scruples, and in declaring the said Confession and Catechisms to be the confession of their faith, excepting only some clauses in the twentieth and twenty-third chapters, concerning which clauses the Synod do unanimously declare, that they do not receive those articles in any such sense as to suppose the civil magistrate hath a controlling power over Synods with respect to the exercise of their ministerial authority; or power to persecute any for their religion, or in any sense contrary to the Protestant succession to the throne of Great Britain.”
 - ii. “The Synod do unanimously acknowledge and declare, that they judge the directory for worship, discipline, and government of the Church, commonly



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annexed to the Westminster Confession, to be agreeable in substance to the word of God, and founded thereupon; and therefore do earnestly recommend the same to all their members, to be by them observed as near as circumstances will allow, and Christian prudence direct.”

- d. This act settled the question at the time of **creedal subscription** (whether or not ministers would have to subscribe to a creed), but it opened the door for future debates over the nature of that subscription: **strict subscription** or **system subscription**.

3. Educating Ministers

a. Log College

- i. Founded by Presbyterian minister **William Tenant**, and operated from approx. 1726 to 1746.
- ii. Was the first theological seminary in America serving Presbyterians, but was met with scoffing and distrust by many, in favor of the existing and established schools in Europe.
- iii. A number of its students, such as **Gilbert Tenant**, later became well known revivalist preachers and contributed to the Old Side – New Side Controversy.

b. Princeton Theological Seminary

- i. The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church established The Theological Seminary at Princeton, New Jersey, in 1812.
- ii. Sought to solve the shortage of ministers during the time of westward expansion.
- iii. Became a staunch defender and promoter of confessional reformed theology and Calvinistic orthodoxy, up until the 1920s and 1930s.

4. First Great Awakening

- a. The **First Great Awakening** was a revival movement among protestant churches both in Europe and especially the American colonies in the 1730s and 1740s, characterized by promoting greater emotional involvement and personal experience in someone’s faith, often with a lesser concern and emphasis on doctrine and ritual.
- b. Itinerant preaching especially characterized this movement. Some notable preachers include Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, John Wesley, and Samuel Davies.
- c. This became the context for the **Old Side – New Side Controversy**.

Next Week... Old Side - New Side Controversy