

# Introduction: Of Sobriety and Legends



American Presbyterians are by most standards an impressive group. Of the fifty-six signers of the Declaration of Independence, Presbyterians accounted for eleven, and in the person of John Witherspoon boasted the only minister to have his name recorded on the nation's founding document. Presbyterians were less numerous in the production of the United States Constitution, but their six members of the fifty-five attending the Constitutional Convention in 1787 were nevertheless a striking showing.

Since the nation's beginning, eight presidents have been members of Presbyterian churches: Andrew Jackson, James Polk, James Buchanan, Grover Cleveland, Benjamin Harrison, Woodrow Wilson, Dwight Eisenhower, and Ronald Reagan. In cultural life, Presbyterians have been no less impressive. Writers with Presbyterian backgrounds include Mark Twain, Eudora Welty, and Frederick Buechner. Presbyterians have also produced a number of popular entertainers, from Jimmy Stewart, Shirley Temple, and Dick Van Dyke, to Frank Gifford, Fred (Mr.) Rogers, and David Letterman. In science, Presbyterians are common: C. Everett Koop, a leading pediatric surgeon, served as surgeon general of the United States, Edwin H. Armstrong invented the FM

radio, and John Glenn and Sally Ride were astronauts who pioneered in space exploration.

Meanwhile, Presbyterians in business have made fortunes, from Andrew Carnegie to H. Ross Perot and Sam Walton. The success of American Presbyterians in these fields underscores the on adage about the social mobility of American Protestants: “Baptists are Methodists who can read, and Presbyterians are Baptists with shoes.”

This book is only indirectly about these Presbyterians, however. A glance through the index at the end will reveal John Witherspoon and possibly one of the presidents mentioned above. The reason is that this brief history of American Presbyterianism is not about prominent Americans who happened to be Presbyterian. Instead, it is the history of the chief Presbyterian Church and its subsequent traditions. As such, this is a work of church history, not social history or collective biography. It provides an overview of the teachings and practices that set Presbyterians apart from other Christian communions in America.

This is not to say that the prominent Americans who worshiped in Presbyterian churches are insignificant for understanding the history of Presbyterianism in the United States. In fact, the pages that follow should be very instructive for understanding why a Protestant communion with doctrinal tenets (i.e., Calvinism) running directly contrary to American ideals of freedom and self-sufficiency became attractive to so many successful Americans. For at the beginning of American Presbyterianism’s history, its status politically, socially, and culturally was much more like the adage about Presbyterians being Baptists with shoes than about those filling the lists of presidents, writers, and millionaires.

In sum, this book is about how a church with very humble origins became a communion known for belonging to that highly prized position of membership in the United States’ Protestant establishment. The chapters that follow also raise questions, however, about whether being a religion of the affluent, successful, and powerful was supposed to be the point of being Presbyterian in America.

### **Presbyterian Primer**

Anyone looking for an easy definition of Presbyterianism will likely be disappointed. For instance, none of the confessions or catechisms pro-

duced by the Reformed branches of the Protestant Reformation provides a summary statement on Presbyterianism. Dictionaries are not much help either. As a noun, *Presbyterian* refers to someone who is a member of a Presbyterian church. As an adjective, the word refers to a form of church government in which presbyters (i.e., elders) exercise rule. Since the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) also involves the rule of elders, such definitions have serious limitations.

Presbyterianism, as the name suggests, is a form of church government different from either episcopal (more hierarchical) or congregational (more democratic) polities. But church government was only a part of what distinguished Presbyterians from other Christians, and possibly not even a major feature.

The Reformation of the sixteenth century produced three major branches of Protestantism that became part of the state-church order in Western Europe: the Anglican, Lutheran, and Reformed. Presbyterians were synonymous with Reformed, the latter being the term used on the Continent—Presbyterian designating similar beliefs and practices among the English-speaking Protestants in Great Britain and North America.

As the word *reformed* suggests, Presbyterians, like their Reformed siblings, were intent on reforming the church according to the Word of God. In theology, this meant an emphasis on human sinfulness, the complete sufficiency of Christ for salvation, a call to good works based not on merit but on love, and the elevation of Scripture over church tradition as the authority for determining ecclesiastical controversies.

In worship, Presbyterians and Reformed groups simplified services, eliminated practices that did not have direct warrant from Scripture (such as reducing the number of sacraments from seven to two), and devoted greater attention to the proclamation of the Word through preaching. In polity, Presbyterians and Reformed churches established the rule of elders through a series of graded courts, from the session at the local congregation, presbyteries and synods regionally, to the General Assembly as the body representing the whole church. (For Reformed groups, the different levels of church judicatories are consistories, classes, and synods.) These teachings and reforms took shape in the confessions and catechisms that Presbyterian and Reformed churches adopted during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as well as in directories for public worship and church government.

Yet trying to define Presbyterianism as a body of ideas or a set of practices without reference to history is like trying to explain baseball to someone who has never seen a double play or sacrifice fly. Definitions of Presbyterianism only make sense in the light of historical experience. Even the creeds and confessions from which the most conservative of Presbyterians take inspiration and guidance are products of specific historical situations in which particular churches in unique circumstances determined what Presbyterianism meant. If this book has a lesson, this may be the most important: namely, that Presbyterianism understood apart from history is an abstraction bordering on fantasy.

This is not to say that Presbyterianism is relative. It is possible, we believe, to make judgments on better or worse forms of Presbyterianism, or when American Presbyterianism was in good or poor health. And the criteria for making these assessments are sometimes biblical or theological concepts that do transcend history. At the same time, however, it is important to see that even these ideas that appear to be the purest form of Presbyterianism are themselves the product of historical actors, often gifted with keen insight into Scripture and the history of Christian theology, who have emerged as authoritative guides to Presbyterianism and the Reformed faith. As this book makes abundantly clear, Presbyterianism did not fall from the sky with instructions on how to start a seminary, create committees, and serve communion. The elements and character of Presbyterianism have always been contested. This is especially true of the Presbyterian communion that emerged as the most numerous and influential in the United States.

## **Presbyterians and Calvinism**

One reason for stressing the historical development of Presbyterianism, aside from the fact that this is a book of history, is that abstract notions of this Protestant branch can run into difficulty when the ideals don't line up exactly with historical realities. Take the example of Calvinism. One dictionary definition has it that a Presbyterian is a follower of Calvinism as taught in the Presbyterian Church. Historically, it is accurate to say that the founders of Presbyterianism in Scotland and later in America were stalwart defenders of Calvin's understanding of salvation. But to limit the identity of Presbyterianism to the five points

of Calvinism is to foster confusion rather than clarity. For starters, other Protestants have been Calvinists but not Presbyterian, such as Particular or Calvinistic Baptists. To arrive at a doctrinal understanding of Presbyterianism that lacks the very feature highlighted in its name, that is, Presbyterian church government, is to commit an important historical mistake.

Just as significant here is the recognition that, whether for good or ill, not all Presbyterians have been Calvinistic. Cumberland Presbyterians, a group that left the American Presbyterian Church in the early nineteenth century because of objections to predestination and Calvinism's supposed disregard for human responsibility, were one of the first groups in the United States to divorce Presbyterianism and Calvinism. About a century later, liberal Presbyterians had moved well beyond objections to Calvinism to add other parts of historic Christianity to their list of doctrines in need of updating. And yet, in some sense, both of these groups were Presbyterian. They considered themselves part of the Presbyterian tradition not merely because they employed Presbyterian church government. They also traced their roots historically to the development of Presbyterianism in Great Britain and the United States. The following narrative attempts to account for this variety of Presbyterian expressions. To do so involves regarding Presbyterianism as more than the reprimand of Calvinism, and instead looking at it as a religious or denominational tradition that has evolved to include a variety of perspectives on the nature of being Presbyterian.

Here the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's idea of tradition as an argument "extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined . . ." is worthwhile for understanding the authors' approach to Presbyterianism. The history of Presbyterianism has in a sense been a lengthy debate about those features important to Presbyterian witness and identity. This book is about the American side of that argument. It has involved the way Americans appropriated their European past and developed their own expression of Presbyterianism. Some of the interlocutors in this argument about Presbyterianism have been better at seeing continuity and preserving the points at stake in earlier debates, while others have been more inclined to jettison those earlier speeches and venture out into newer lines of analysis. But to appreciate the full range of virtues and vices in American Presbyteri-

anism, the authors have felt obligated to include the most important contributors to this argument even when some of those contributions were, in our estimation, unhealthy and detrimental.

### **Presbyterians and Puritans**

Another possible source of confusion about American Presbyterianism that results from an overly abstract starting point is the relationship between Puritanism and Presbyterianism. Because both groups were in the Reformed wing of the Protestant Reformation and because both were Calvinistic, a common tendency is to lump them together as variations on the same theme. This is, however, a significant mistake since it distorts what has been a constant catalyst in the history of American Presbyterianism, namely, the disputes between immigrants to the United States with Presbyterian backgrounds and those with a Puritan heritage.

Presbyterians and Puritans were both Calvinistic and shared common ground in defending Reformed conceptions of sin and grace. But after this shared point the similarities quickly become harder to spot. The Puritans were Anglicans. That is, they were English and so members of the Church of England. They gained their reputation and name because they wanted to purify the Church of England, in line with the goals of the Protestant Reformation. Some of those known as Puritans, a group increasingly hard to pin down, were Presbyterian and desired the abolition of bishops and priests in favor of a system of Presbyterian judicatories. But the interests of Puritans were different from those of the Presbyterians.

As the first chapter makes clear, Presbyterians were Scottish and Irish, and the Presbyterian Church was a body initially separate from the Church of England. The independence of Presbyterianism, however, became exceedingly difficult to maintain during the seventeenth century with its vexed political antagonism among the English monarchy, Parliament, and Scotland.

At certain points, Puritans and Presbyterians found themselves on the same side in these struggles. But at other times their interests differed, not simply because of variations in their religious outlook, but also because of practical realities in Scotland and England. The relationships between Presbyterians and Puritans in the North American British colonies and

then the United States were more cordial, thanks to the elimination of the threat of the Anglican establishment and to greater autonomy in the New World. Still, the Puritans in New England and the Scots and Scotch-Irish Presbyterians in the mid-Atlantic and Southern colonies and states did not always see things eye to eye. In fact, the major divisions in American Presbyterianism, the eighteenth-century Old Side-New Side struggle, the nineteenth-century Old School-New School division, and the twentieth-century modernist-fundamentalist controversy were outworkings of important differences between the heritages of English Puritanism and Scottish Presbyterianism.

### **Presbyterians and America**

Yet another reason for stressing historical realities as opposed to religious ideals in trying to understand the history of American Presbyterianism is the uniqueness of the Presbyterian Church on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean from Scotland and Ireland. American Presbyterians are clearly indebted to developments in Scotland and Northern Ireland prior to the eighteenth century. Furthermore, the original membership of the Presbyterian churches in the United States was overwhelmingly Scottish and Scotch-Irish. Even so, the Presbyterianism that developed in America was significantly different from Scottish, Irish, or even Canadian Presbyterianism because of the unique set of circumstances that Presbyterians encountered in America. In fact, the subject of this book is the narrow one of Presbyterianism that was distinctly American as opposed to Americanized versions of Scottish or Irish Presbyterianism. This was also the first Presbyterianism to take formal shape in the New World with the creation in 1706 of the original American presbytery, the Presbytery of Philadelphia.

This book is about the denomination that grew from this first presbytery's roots, the Presbyterian Church (USA), as well as the denominations that at different times left this American denomination, such as the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian Church in America, and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. All of these churches trace their roots to the founding of the Presbytery of Philadelphia in 1706.

As chapter one also makes clear, other Presbyterian churches came to America, for instance the Covenanters (Reformed Presbyterians) and the Seceders (Associate Reformed Presbyterians). But these were transplants from Scottish Presbyterianism. American Presbyterianism, however, was substantially an American original, being created without the oversight or support of Old World churches, figuring out what it meant to be a Presbyterian Church in America as circumstances allowed. Without historical awareness, the uniqueness of American Presbyterianism is either difficult to see or a source of confusion.

We have divided the history of this American Presbyterian Church into three main periods. The first runs from the founding of the Presbytery of Philadelphia in 1706 to the formation in 1789 of the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. American Presbyterianism during this era was characterized by basic questions of institutional identity. What sort of theological, educational, and spiritual criteria should be used to choose Presbyterian pastors? What are the functions of sessions, presbyteries, and synods? How should Presbyterians respond to America's religious diversity and freedom? These concerns were substantially responsible for giving an infant church of humble origins the institutional foundation on which future generations of Presbyterians would build. But American Presbyterianism during the colonial era was hardly set in stone, nor did it have many Old World models to emulate. The founders of the American church may not have been making it up as they went along, but the record shows that clarity of vision and purpose was not a trait of eighteenth-century American Presbyterianism. The formation of the American Presbyterian tradition was contested at practically every stage.

The second period covers the decades between the first General Assembly and the 1860s, when American Presbyterians decided to exist independently in regional churches that were divided by the politics of the Civil War. During this era American Presbyterianism matured and flourished, even though it took a division over the Second Great Awakening between Old School and New School Presbyterians to achieve such discernment. Substantial disagreements over the nature and function of the church animated Presbyterianism during this era—thanks to questions that arose over the church's involvement in the Christianization of

the United States. But the Presbyterians who contributed to these debates, both among the Old School and New School, added intellectual heft to the institutional skeleton of Presbyterianism inherited from the colonial period. To the extent that American Presbyterians today have strong conceptions of Presbyterian identity, whether conservative, evangelical, or mainline, they owe a substantial debt to the concerted attention to Presbyterian faith and practice by nineteenth-century Presbyterians.

The third period extends from the 1869 reunion of the Old and New Schools in the North to the reunion in 1983 of northern and southern Presbyterianism. This stage of Presbyterian history is the most difficult to write because it involves covering both the northern and southern Presbyterian mainline denominations, plus keeping an eye on the sideline churches such as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), and Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) that left those larger and more diverse communions.<sup>1</sup> This era was one marked by interdenominational cooperation and the pursuit of formal ecumenical ties among Protestants of all kinds, and later between Protestants and Roman Catholics.

As much as the reasons given for these ecumenical discussions appealed to Christ's prayer that his disciples be one, the politicization of American Presbyterianism during the Civil War was also crucial. Late nineteenth-century Protestants, often with Presbyterians leading the way, saw the divisions among Protestants as an impediment to the kind of cooperative good will and common action that the United States needed both to overcome domestic ills and to lead internationally in the cause of freedom and democracy. But despite the fraternal spirit of the times, the search for unity could not prevent smaller churches from leaving both the northern and southern churches over important disagreements about the limits of such denominational cooperation. Nor did the widespread support for ecumenism easily break down barriers between Presbyterians in the North and South who for over a century harbored suspicions of each other because of moral and political antagonisms. Our book concludes

1. This book differs from its predecessors, such as Lefferts A. Loetscher's *A Brief History of the Presbyterians* (1978) and James H. Smylie's *A Brief History of the Presbyterians* (1996), that, despite their titles, focused on the American mainline denominations and paid only passing reference to the denominations that formed as the result of controversies within mainline Presbyterianism in the United States.

with some reflection on the prospects for American Presbyterianism at the start of its fourth century of existence.

### **Anniversaries and Celebration**

Anniversaries are generally times of celebration. Many readers of history read it for inspiration. Put those two impulses together, and you have a set of expectations that this book will likely not fulfill. The reason is not that the authors are, as Spiro T. Agnew put it, “nattering nabobs of negativism,” though some have accused us of such. Instead, the lack of revelry here stems from our shared sense of all historical actors’ clay feet. Even if history is not simply the story of human frailty and suffering, if it yields persons, events, and institutions with genuinely noble aspects, history is nonetheless not the place to go for assurance or vindication of one’s deeply held convictions. For every Gilbert Tennent, Albert Barnes, and Harry Emerson Fosdick, there was also a John Thomson, Charles Hodge, and J. Gresham Machen laying claim to a legitimate position within the American Presbyterian Church.

Consequently, although this book uses the tercentenary of American Presbyterianism as the impetus for writing a new history of the Presbyterian experience in the United States, it is not a celebration of the church’s past. As faithful and virtuous as many of our Presbyterian ancestors were, the thrill of recalling their accomplishments will not sustain the difficult work of contemporary Presbyterians seeking to be faithful and discerning.

Indeed, because the authors are interested in serving the church and assisting Presbyterians in their calling to be faithful disciples, we have decided to write a history that is more sober than enthusiastic, and more accurate than filled with legends. For what American Presbyterians need today, as they have throughout their past, is not a rosy or gloomy estimate of their prospects. Instead, they need a history that will yield discernment and wisdom about the strengths and weaknesses of their tradition, as well as the degree to which the circumstances of being American have affected their identities as Presbyterians. If the pages that follow avoid producing disillusionment and optimism but steer in the middle toward hopefulness that, in good Presbyterian fashion, is decent and well ordered, then this book should be worth reading.