

History of Presbyterianism in America

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Presbytery of Philadelphia, 1706

Synod of Philadelphia, 1717

The man to whom the honor belongs of laying the foundation of the Presbyterian Church as an organized body is Francis Makemie. He was an Irishman and a licentiate of the Presbytery of Lagan in 1681. In 1684 he organized the Presbyterian Church in Snow Hill, Maryland. He became an itinerant missionary in Maryland, Virginia, and sometimes as far south as South Carolina. He continually sought the help of other ministers. For many years the growth of the Presbyterian Church was checked by persecution and intolerance.

The Presbytery of Philadelphia was formed in 1706 (due to the missing leaf of the minutes the exact date is uncertain) in Philadelphia and it chose Francis Makemie as its first moderator. Five other ministers were enrolled as members. This was entirely independent of any old world presbytery or synod.

Because of the rapid growth of the Presbytery, due in part to the numerous Scotch-Irish settlers, there was need of further organization. In 1716 there was the organization of the Synod of Philadelphia with three member presbyteries which included the Presbytery of New York, Presbytery of Philadelphia, and Presbytery of New Castle which absorbed the Presbytery of Snow Hill. The first synod meeting was held in Philadelphia on September 17, 1717. The new synod contained 19 ministers, 40 churches, and 3,000 communicant members. The Westminster Confession of Faith was adopted as the confessional standard in 1729 under the Adopting Act.

In the 1730's and 1740's the Presbyterian Church was strongly influenced by the Great Awakening, which became the occasion for a serious division in the Church.

Old Side and New Side, the Division of 1741

At the end of the 1730's, two parties developed in the Church; one favoring revival and the other opposed to it. The revivalist party was known as the New Side. The other party, or Old Side, looked upon such practices as unorthodox and dangerous. From the view of the New Side, the Old was dead orthodoxy; from the Old Side, the New was unlearned fanaticism. The immediate occasion for division came in 1740 when Gilbert Tennent, leader of the revivalist party, preached a famous sermon called, "The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry." The Old Side, led by Robert Cross, protested to the Synod of 1741. The Old Side emphasized the strict Presbyterian Church order in terms of the authority of Scripture, the Confession, and the Church. The New Side was more tolerant of departures from ecclesiastical strictness in the name of a cherished emphasis on experiential religion. At the synod meeting a roll call vote was taken and the New Side, being in the minority, withdrew from the synod.

The core of the New Side was the Presbytery of New Brunswick. In 1745 this presbytery, with New York and New Castle, formed the New Side Synod of New York. This side was more active in missionary outreach and educational activity and as a result experienced more growth in the following years.

Synod of New York and Philadelphia, 1758

Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1798

Almost from the beginning of the division there was talk of eventual reunion. Reunion was finally effected on the basis of the compromise Plan of Union on May 29, 1758, in Philadelphia where both synods were meeting separately. When the two rival synods emerged to form the Synod of New York and Philadelphia, Gilbert Tennent was chosen as the first moderator. In the first year there were 98 ministers, 200 congregations, and 10,000 members. The church continued to grow and by the 1780's a meeting of all the ministers became impractical. In 1788 the national constitution provided for a national general assembly. The first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the USA met in Philadelphia on the third Thursday in May of 1789. It was opened with a sermon by Dr. Witherspoon and Dr. John Rodgers of New York was chosen the first moderator. There were four synods, 16 presbyteries, 419 churches, 177 ordained pastors, and about 18,000 members.

In 1801 the General Assembly and the Connecticut General Assembly (Congregationalist) adopted the "Plan of Union." The plan allowed interchange among pastors as well as mutual forbearance and accommodation. This helped impart to American Presbyterianism the dual character which resulted in the Division of 1837. It also affected doctrinal instruction. The Old School was alarmed by the changes and the New School was sympathetic to them.

Cumberland Presbyterian Church, 1810

In 1805 as a result of the Second Great Awakening, the Cumberland Presbytery of the PCUSA licensed to the ministry a number of zealous young men who had little academic training and would not assent to the Westminster Standards. A minority of the presbytery protested and appealed to the Synod of Kentucky which suspended a majority of the presbytery and all its licentiates. The Cumberland Presbytery was organized on February 4, 1810, by three Presbyterian ministers—Finis Ewing, Samuel King, and Samuel McAdow. Other contributing factors were a rejection of fatalism (predestination and election), of the Westminster Confession of Faith, and of the insistence that the rigid standards of the Presbyterian Church for the education of clergy be relaxed. In 1869 approval was given by the General Assembly for the blacks to separate. A union with the PCUSA in 1906 was only partially successful when two-thirds of the members joined.

Colored Cumberland Presbyterian Church, 1869

Second Cumberland Presbyterian Church in the United States

Before the Civil War there were 20,000 Negroes in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. They belonged to the same congregations as the whites but often had their own ministers and meetings. In 1869 with the full approval of the General Assembly of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, they were formed into three presbyteries in Tennessee. Some sources called the original body the African Cumberland Presbyterian Church.