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# The presbyterians in the United States

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Graduation Thesis  
of

A. A. Wood.

Subject:—

The Presbyterians  
in the  
United States.

# The Presbyterians in the United States.

As it is impossible to trace the various influences that go to make up the individual, the community or the nation, so one finds it to be a futile effort to attempt to trace the various influences that have contributed to American Presbyterianism.

It doubtless owes its origin chiefly to Scotland nevertheless it has received tributaries from France, Holland, England and various other sources.

American Presbyterianism is an outgrowth of loyalty to the Bible and to Conscience under the oppressive weight of bigotry and religious intolerance.

This spirit was found abundantly manifested in such men as

John Knox and the Scottish Covenanters, in Chalmers and the Free Church and in the suffering Huguenots.

As climate, soil and general environment produce changes in the exotic plant and animal life, so Presbyterianism on being transplanted into American soil teeming with life & energy and fanned by the exhilarating breezes of civil and religious liberty dropped some of the excrescences of its creed & added to in some places so as to present a type of Presbyterianism in harmony with its environments.

We find in the U. S. as in Scotland a variety of groups of the Presbyterian Church, all of which are essentially one in doctrine.

They all march under the same banner of faith, with slight modifications.

The thirty nine Articles of the Westminster Confession is the standard borne by every Presbyterian as embracing either literally or substantially his Creed.

The lines of demarkation between these various groups are often so dim, the distinction so trivial that to trace these boundary lines in some cases becomes a difficult task. The Presbyterian Church in the U. S. is a collection of various elements rather than a unitary body, whose whole history is one of separations and combinations.

Some of these branches which have contributed their influence in giving cast to the present form of Presbyterianism we will briefly notice.

In 1733. The Associate Presbytery

was founded in opposition to the Aristocratic declaration on the part of the Synod in reference to the settlements of pastors.

The Reformed Church of Scotland embraced the Covenants of Scotland who signed the Solemn League & Covenant drawn up by John Knox and adopted by the Westminster Assembly of divines in 1650. in which they protested against the attempt of the government of England to enforce the Episcopal form of worship.

The Reformed Church of England - a name applied to that body in England known more familiarly as Non-Conformists or dissenters to the Established Church, separated in 1661 & attempted to establish a church modeled after the government of Calvin in Geneva.

and Knox in Scotland.

Unable to conform to the intolerant Uniformity Act of Chas II in August 1662, voluntarily ~~resc~~ about two thousand men voluntarily resigned their Curates for Conscience sake.

The Dutch Reformed & German Reformed Churches are also representative Covenant Churches.

All the above Churches are practically one in doctrine & worship.

The differences being in national rather than doctrinal characteristics.

Before proceeding further in presenting the history of the Presbyterian Church we will attempt to answer the question, What is Presbyterianism and the distinctive features of the Presbyterian Church?

We cannot, of course, here attempt more than the most general definitions. First, as to Government.

There are in the Presbyterian Church four judicatures:-

The Session, The Presbytery, The Synod & the General Assembly, corresponding in functions - very closely with those of the town, county, state & national assemblies in Civil affairs. The Presbyterian Church is characteristically democratic in the administration of its affairs.

The Session is the official body of the individual Church. Its officers are a pastor - or teaching elder - the ruling elders - not less than three or more than twelve - and a board of deacons. All of these officers being elected by the members of the church, the ruling

Elders & deacons being ordained by the pastor. To the Elders is committed the spiritual oversight of the interests of the Church while its temporal affairs are entrusted more especially to the hands of the deacons.

### The Presbytery.

The Presbytery is composed of all the ministers and one Elder from each Congregation within a limited district. Its duties are to receive and issue Appeals from the Sessions, to examine & to license Candidates for the Ministry, to ordain install, to remove & to judge ministers, to investigate the theological standing of Churches represented & to look after their spiritual interests generally.

### The Synod.

The Synod is a combination of three or more Presbyteries

Its duty being chiefly to review the work of the Presbyteries.

The General Assembly

This is the highest Court of the Presbyterian Church. Its functions being the hearing & issuing all appeals referred to them from the subordinate bodies and to settle all controversies respecting doctrine discipline &c. —

As to doctrine.

The Standards of the Presbyterian faith both in Gr. Britain and America are, the Westminster Confession of Faith together with the longer & shorter Catechisms appended.

Their system of doctrine is Calvinistic accepting - at least as a theory - the "five points of Calvinism" - Predestination, particular

atonement, original sin, Special grace, and the perseverance of the saints. There are however two classes of Calvinists, the High Calvinists represented by the old Scottish Covenanters, and the moderate branch rep by the New School. The old school are somewhat peculiar in adhering rigidly to the Bible methods of worship e.g. singing psalms instead of hymns, regarding it to be sinful to sing hymns of man's composition. While the Westminster Confession is received by all as a standard embodiment of their Creed, there is a difference of opinion as to its interpretation. The old school adhering to the literal subscription while the new school accept the spirit of

its teaching subscribing to the literal statements of the more essential parts.

The honor of laying the foundations of the first Presbyterian Church in America as an organized body, is ascribed to Francis Makemie. He was an Irishman, a student from one of the Scotch Universities.

He organized the first Presbyterian Church at Snow Hill Maryland on a narrow neck of land between the Chesapeake bay and the Atlantic Ocean, in 1683.

There doubtless were other Presbyterian Congregations before Makemie's time, but not as an organized body.

He began the work on the Methodist itinerant plan.

"The people," he said, "are seat-

11  
tered like sheep in the wilderness and a large portion of my labor is to search them out.

He went down the Elizabeth River into Virginia where he said he found a desolate people mourning the loss of their minister. Here he soon gathered a number of congregations.

He journeyed from place to place visiting the various churches as a bishop in a diocese from the eastern shores of Maryland to Virginia and sometimes even to South Carolina.

Feeling the need of additional workers in 1703 he returned to England and brought back helpers to his need field.

But instead of finding enlarged opportunities for usefulness, he was met by the intolerance of the which did not allow a

a dissenter to preach without a license. For some time presbyterianism was hindered by the persecution and intolerance of the Established Church, in  
 It seemed as though the hardships to be tolerated were even more severe than in the mother country. For three quarters of a century the Episcopal Church was exclusively tolerated and sustained by law. In 1707 Mackenzie, on his way to New England to secure supplies for the newly organized churches, proposed to stop at New York and preach in a Dutch Church. On being forbidden by Lord Cornbury he preached in the private house of Wm Jackson. where he was arrested and taken before the Governor who asked him how he dare

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preach without a license. Maccemie referred him to the Toleration Act of King William of 1689. Various Specious objections were presented by the Government which were promptly replied to by Maccemie with exceptional skill. Nevertheless he was committed to jail where he was detained for some time, when after much difficulty in repeated efforts he secured a hearing on a writ of "Habeas Corpus".

Before the Court he presented his case so eloquently and with such legal ability as to show most clearly the illegality of his imprisonment. He showed himself more than a match for the prosecuting attorney, and a verdict of "not guilty" was finally returned by the jury.

His visit to England resulted in the securing two young men as missionaries to his new field. In the spring of 1706 the work had so grown on his hands that a more complete organization was deemed necessary, hence these three, united with four other missionaries already in the work in Del. Md. & Penn in the creation of the first Classical Presbytery. In this Presbytery we find the happy union of the various types of British Presbyterianism. Marston the Scotch Irishman Hampton the Irishman & McWhisk the Scotchman uniting with the puritan missionaries from New Eng. in the organic union of a Presbytery. Here then we have in miniature the Presbyterian Church of the U. S.

In 1710 through the election of a new Governor of N.Y. The tyranny of the intolerance of the Established Church ceased & the Presbyterian Church was henceforth left to its natural development.

Released from these tyrannical chains it rapidly extended its borders & increased in numbers & efficiency in regions hitherto without the Gospel.

They pressed their way with undaunted courage from faith & burning zeal through the wilderness climbing mountains fording streams, penetrating dense forests beset on every hand by wild & ferocious animals or savage Indians many of them supporting themselves by cultivating the soil in addition to their missionary labors.

They were practical earnest broadminded men, men who could adapt themselves to their circumstances. They were men without the technical education of the schools but they knew God, and the Gospel they preached penetrated the hearts of their hearers producing marvellous results because it came fresh from hearts all aglow with the love of God and a desire to save their fellow men.

They were men especially equipped for a special work.

The demand for workers was constant & more & more imperative.

Says Dr Greene as late as 1805:-  
 "Give us ministers is the cry of the missionary fields. Give us ministers is the entreaty of numerous vacancies. Give us ministers

is the demand of large Congregations"

These cries were generally most liberally responded to on the part of Eng. In 1713 Robert Mather - Spoon-joy in Glasgow Univ - came to labor as a missionary on a salary of 40 pounds a year.

As the Presbyteries increased in number and became scattered over a broader territory a more complete organization was found necessary a representative assembly.

Hence a General Presbytery or Synod was organized embracing four subordinate Presbyteries.

It might be of interest did the limits of this paper permit to trace the successive steps of these brave missionaries as they pushed out into remoter fields on their evangelic mission.

It suffices to say that the history of the Colonization of the various States is the history of Presbyterianism in the same territories. Close in the train of the hardy pioneers who felled the forests, bridged the streams & subdued the soil followed the heroic aggressive Presbyterian herald of the Cross. Indeed the missionary was a Joshua leading out the advancing pilgrims to newer & broader fields of usefulness, to grander conquests & richer trophies. So that with ~~out~~ scarcely an exception above these primitive settlements as an ensignia of peace & good will to man floated from the standards of the Cross the "true blue" flag of the Presbyterian missionary.

Missions. The Presbyterian has ever been a missionary church. Its zeal in missionary work was in its earliest history and is to say its special characteristic. At the first meeting of the Synod of Phila. a "fund for pious uses" was provided on the following terms 1<sup>st</sup>. That some provision should be made to relieve & assist ministers who are unable to subsist upon contributions from their hearers. 2<sup>nd</sup> that provision should be made for preaching the Gospel where there are not as yet any fixed ministers. 3<sup>rd</sup> that the contribution be in proportion to the circumstances of the ministers. 4<sup>th</sup> that only those be recipients who are actively engaged in the ministry. 5<sup>th</sup> that some hopeful young men might be encouraged to enter the ministry.

This was the basis of all missionary enterprise which have arisen in later years in the Presbyterian Church until today when we have the Presbyterian Board of Missions one of the most potent factors and generous contributors to the evangelization of the world found upon the American Continent.

### Subscription Controversy:

The first presbytery was, as we have observed an assemblage of various types of ministers. The first Synod met as a "meeting of ministers" until 1729 without a constitution and hence without subscription to any formulated Creed being required. They were a flexible body which sought to adapt itself to the circumstances in which they found themselves in the New World.

As the question of subscription to the Westminster Confession became agitated they began to take sides. The more conservative represented by the Scotch Covenanters favoring a verbal subscription, while the more liberal type of Eng. & Irish dissenters preferred to subscribe to the Articles as containing the substance of their faith. This was the feeling when the Synod met at Phila in 1729. The question was thoroughly discussed and finally referred to a committee composed of two strong subscriptionists, two Anti. "

" Two intermediate men. The Elders favored the more liberal side. There was therefore a strong pressure brought to bear upon the extreme subscriptionists

To either compromise or separate. At this time Dickenson one of the ablest men in the Presbyterian Church - healed the threatening breach by presenting the successfully constructed Adopting Act The principles of which are adhered to <sup>to</sup> the present day. This act tided them over the troubled waters that had divided the two parties and for a few years these two types of Presbyterianism worked together harmoniously upon American soil.

Had the spirit of the Adopting Act ever after prevailed the two branches what an amount of irritations, of contentions might have been avoided, but the strict subscriptionists could not long rest under the liberality of this act,

hence in 1730 they again demanded verbal subscription.

### Heresy Trial

The movement toward strict subscription was accelerated by the first heresy trial in the case of Samuel Humphill who was invited to preach as an assistant of Jedediah Andrews in Phila. He was found to be an unscrupulous and unprincipled man. The case was brought before a commission which charged him with Armenian & Romanian tenets, together with a strong deistic bent.

Benjamin Franklin espoused his cause in a letter written to a friend to which Dickinson replied defending the action of the Commission.

The struggle continued for strict Subscription until 1736. When a skillfully drawn up act was passed by the Synod favoring the subscriptionists. Repeated differences & contentions arose at succeeding meetings until 1745 when a Committee was appointed to remove differences.

But the Presbytery from N.Y. declined to accept the plan proposed and determined to erect another Synod known as the Synod of New York. which was mutually agreed to and a friendly separation followed.

From this time therefore we have two Synods representing two different types of Presbyterianism. viz. the Phila. Synod. The Subscriptionists. or Old School.

The New York Synod. The anti-subscriptionists or New School.

The two Synods united in 1758 after a long unsatisfactory separate relation.

A Plan of union having been drawn up which adjusted the differences of both sides & brought them into harmonious action. They finally fell back upon the Principles of the Adopting Act refusing direct Subscription. Thus ended the long controversy over Subscription to the Westminster Confession.

Other unions may be noted in this connection. In 1782 the Associate & the Reformed (Covenanters) Presbyteries united into one organic body which constituted the Associate Reformed Church

There were some who did not enter this union. There were then the Associate & the Associate Reformed Churches. In 1858 these two branches combined assuming the name of the United Presbyterian Ch. The Great Revival.

During the closing years of the 18th Century the spiritual sensibilities of the Church seemed to have become blunted through schismatic wrangling, the intemperance & other improprieties of the clergy. The ministry were so deficient in the spirit of the Gospel as to be utterly helpless in inciting any spiritual life within the masses. Vital themes were rarely, if ever, treated.

Their so called sermons were mere moral essays.

Nevertheless the fire of holy zeal & enthusiastic devotion had not died out of all hearts.

It may have been choked or smothered by the cold damp incubus of the worldly spirit which had settled about it.

However it was under such circumstances that the great Kentucky Revival of 1800 broke out & spread over a large extent of country like one vast prairie fire carrying everything before it.

So the Holy Spirit seemed to bring men upon their knees crying for mercy, in marvellous numbers.

The work began under the agency of James Mc Gready

McGee a Methodist and others  
 of the Presbyterian & Methodist  
 Churches. In the summer  
 of 1800 extraordinary & astound-  
 ing scenes were witnessed  
 people in multitudes in tears  
 crying for mercy. The noise  
 is compared to the surging  
 waves of a troubled sea.

The infidel forgot his philos-  
 ophy & trembled & fell to the  
 earth under the mighty power  
 of the Spirit. It is to this  
 revival we must look for  
 the origin of Camp meetings.

The proceedings had become so  
 extravagant that it was felt neces-  
 sary to set a limit to these  
 manifestations. Many of the  
 Presbyterian ministers felt  
 that the test of a genuine revi-  
 val should be continually applied.

The extravagances of some of the meetings served rather as stumbling blocks to true religion than a help.

They were now very much in need of additional ministers to care for this large number of converts to instruct them in Christian doctrines.

The schools were unable to supply the demand. Hence some of these converts were licensed to preach to & otherwise care for this multitude of converts. This action was censured by the Synod.

An appeal was made to the Synod & after waiting some time for a redress of their grievances, as a last resort withdrew and reorganized the Presbytery in the Cumberland

valley Tenn. as an independent Presbytery, 1810, known to day as the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. which from this small beginning has grown to be one of the leading branches in the Presbyterian Church having independent Synods and even a separate General Assembly.

### The Great rupture.

Ominous cloud at about this time (1830-37) appeared threatening another rupture between the new & old schools.

It was claimed by the old school that dangerous errors were rife. New Haven was regarded as the fountain head of heresy. The Professors had put forth speculations which had occasioned earnest discussion.

Dr Woods of Andover wrote to Mr Palmer in 1836. as follows:—

I believe as you say that there is a perfect understanding among those opposed to Calvinism. They are working in concert. There is an alarming looseness among young preachers & the battle must be fought here, there, & every where.

Dr's Foster, Evans & Cornelius were deeply alarmed with the loose speculations which have come from the New Haven School, from Mr Finney & others of that stamp. I know how they all felt & what a full conviction they had of the notions which are peculiar to Dr Taylor & Mr Finney & which would undermine the fair fabric of our Evangelical Churches & spread

a system far more unscriptural & pernicious than Wesleyan Methodism".

The feeling displayed by the old side seemed to be similar to that of the previous century with reference to the Adopting Act. The result of this state of feeling was that Dr's Albert Barnes and Lyman Beecher were charged with promulgating Armenian doctrines respecting Free Agency, accountability, original sin, Total Depravity, & Regeneration.

A long and wearisome trial ensued the details of which we cannot follow out, suffice it to say that Dr's Barnes & Beecher were acquitted by a large majority.

Dr Barnes & Beecher were the leading lights among the Presbyterians in America during their time.

Barnes Graduate of Hamilton College Took a four year's Theological Course at Princeton.

In 1823 was installed pastor of the Presbyterian Church at Morristown N.J. Here he began to write his Commentaries.

His ministrations were marked by their clearness & fairness of treatment. As a preacher he was regarded as standing at the head of the profession.

Over a half a million of his Commentaries were sold, before he died, - in America alone.

He was a man of extreme modesty & humble devotion to God, conscientiously opposed

To all academic degrees & marks of distinction

In 1849 was invited to a professorship in Lane Seminary which he declined. Resigned his charge as pastor of the 1st Presbyterian Church of Phila in 1868 which he had so long & so faithfully served.

Dr. Herrick Johnson says of him: - "He was conscience incarnate a man for the stake if need be but not for a compromise of what he believed to be the truth." Dr. Sydney Beecher

was born at New Haven in 1796 graduated in 1797. Studied theology with Dr. Dwight one year was ordained 1799 & installed pastor of East Hampton N. Y.

In 1810 he removed to Litchfield Conn. & in 1826 to New Haven Sh

Church Boston, in 1830 was elected, President & professor of Theology in Lane Theol. Sem.

After 20 years spent in this capacity he again returned to Boston, & later removed to Brooklyn within a stone's throw of Plymouth Church. Dr Beecher was universally esteemed. He was a leader in all current reforms, his voice was ever raised - even as that of his illustrious son - in behalf of Civil & religious liberty.

A galaxy of profound scholars, Eloquent Preachers, & zealous workers adorn the pages of Presbyterian History from John Knox to John Hall, but time forbids their presentation in this paper.

## The Schools of the Church.

The Presbyterian Church has ever sounded the highest note along the educational line and is therefore especially characterized by an educated ministry. It has founded & built Colleges all over our land. It has also planted & liberally endowed many theological seminaries which are unsurpassed in the scholastic equipment furnished the minister. Chief of which may be mentioned Princeton, Union, Auburn, Alleghany, Lane, North Western, Danville and San Francisco Theological Schools.

## The General Assembly.

The Church grew to such dimensions, scattered over so extended a territory

That the Synods failed to meet the requirements of the changed conditions. A representative body became imperative, a Supreme Court in the Church, accordingly in 1788 the Synod resolved to organize a General Assembly composed of four Synods (N. Y. N. J.) Phila, Va. & the Carolinas. The Westminster Confession was revised, the constitution adopted was essentially that of the original Adopting Act of 1729.

With the adopting of this Constitution the Presbyterian Church began a new period as a fully organized & equipped body. The American Presbyterian Church entered upon this period adhering to its original standard position

viz: The Westminster Standards  
 of 1729 and under this banner  
~~she~~ has ever marshaled her hosts  
 steadily & healthfully advancing  
 through the fog of disunion and  
 sun-light of reunion between  
 two dangers ever threatening  
 them, the Scylla of the license  
 of non-subscriptionists on the  
 one side and the Charybdis of the  
 intolerance & tyranny of the  
 strict subscriptionists on the  
 other.

This month of  
 May the Church celebrates the  
 Centennial of its existence as a  
 completely organized Church  
 in America as the Assembly  
 held at Phila.

The two great Assemblies of  
 New York (Meth) & Phila will  
 be watched with eagerness by  
 a large portion of the Christian  
 world.

as the transactions of these bodies will doubtless be fraught with eternal interests.

The North & South Divisions.

In 1861

The Church split on the Slavery question & has ever since acted in separate bodies having distinct Synods & General Assemblies.

During the struggle of the Civil war the Old & the New Schools learned, in this common cause, to forget their trivial differences and in 1869 united in one body.

Ever since the war the tendencies have all been toward union & this spirit has been in the air in the religious as well as in civil affairs.

The Church in this 19th Century is more & more emphasizing the

the Spirit of the Gospel rather than the letter & thus rapidly are unifying once discordant elements. The Dutch & German Reformed branches with their national differences & characteristics wearing off & by the magnetism of the Spirit of Christ are continually approaching each other and the indications are that they are soon to coalesce.

The Great branches of the North & South are still separate organizations; Their union is however a matter of considerable solicitation among the leaders of the Church and we may look for some marked strides toward union ~~as~~ taken by the General Assembly now in session at Phila.

Now that the war with its

issues are over, now that the  
 battle flags are furled and  
 in the Great Parliament of the  
 U. S. a General Amnesty bill  
 has been granted & union is  
 again restored in civil affairs  
 shall not the same be true in  
 the religious world we be-  
 lieve it will be. We can  
 already see the dawn announce-  
 ing the coming day, when each  
 division shall bring together  
 its isolated ray of light and  
 heat, so that with the increas-  
 ed heat & force thus generated  
 they may go forth with accel-  
 erated speed leading on God's  
 mighty hosts to its higher higher  
 holier ground and quickening the  
 hearts of the unsaved multitudes to  
 this new life. Then shall our  
 wish fully realized: ~~That they all may be~~  
~~as thou~~

That they all may be one; as  
thou Father, art in one and  
I in thee, that they may  
also be one in us; that the  
world may believe that  
thou hast sent me.

A. A. Wood.

'88 R.M.S.S.