

## From Revolution to Revivalism

### Introduction

- **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*. Quotes are from the same.
- **Definition:** 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*.
- **Goal:** By understanding the story of our branch of the Christian family, we will be able to learn from the past and better understand the emphases and tensions of the present.

### Review: from the Old Country to the First Great Awakening

- Presbyterianism in America began without support from a European mother church and without patronage from colonial governments, largely through pioneering efforts by men like Francis Mackemie.
- The Presbytery of Philadelphia was organized in 1706 with 7 pastors. By 1729, largely through Presbyterian immigration, it reorganized as a synod with 3 presbyteries and 43 ministerial members.
- American Presbyterians came in 3 basic 'flavors': *experiential*, *theological*, and *transformational*.
- These different flavors clashed over the question of "creedal subscription" and the First Great Awakening, with the latter conflict causing a split between "New Side" and "Old Side" Presbyterians from 1745-58.

### How were Presbyterians involved in events leading up to the American Revolution?

- Timeline of this period:

|           |                                    |
|-----------|------------------------------------|
| 1754-1763 | - the French and Indian War        |
| 1765      | - the Stamp Act                    |
| 1770      | - the Boston Massacre              |
| 1773      | - the Boston Tea Party             |
| 1775      | - Battles of Lexington and Concord |
| 1775-1783 | - the American Revolutionary War   |
- From 1766 onward, Presbyterians began corresponding and meeting with Congregationalists from New England to work together on "spreading the gospel and preserving the religious liberties of the churches."
- Regarding the latter, there was real concern that the Church of England – which already had government support in New York and Virginia – would soon impose a bishop on America and kill religious liberty.
- In 1775, as war loomed, the Presbyterian Synod issued a pastoral letter that took a moderating position:
  - Called for loyalty to King George III and allegiance to the British nation
  - Also called for prayers and loyalty to the Continental Congress
  - The conclusion included this warning: "there is no example in history in which civil liberty was destroyed, and the rights of conscience preserved entire."
- This latter point seems to have swayed majority Presbyterians support in favor of the War. The most famous Presbyterian minister at the time, John Witherspoon (who signed the Declaration), said: "The knowledge of God and his truths have from the beginning of the world been chiefly, if not entirely, confined to those parts of the earth, where some degree of liberty and political justice were to be seen..."
- **Questions** 1) How is this perspective understandable, in light of European religious conflict?  
2) Does the experience of underground churches globally confirm or modify this assertion?

### How did Presbyterians suffer during the War?

- A Hessian (German) captain fighting for the British said, "Call this war... not an American rebellion, it is nothing more or less than an Irish-Scotch Presbyterian Rebellion."
- Presbyterian ministers were labeled "ringleaders of rebellion" and arrested; sometimes their homes were ransacked. Services were disrupted. Churches buildings were razed; soldiers broke up pews for firewood!

### What effect did the American victory have on American Presbyterianism?

- In 1783 as the war ended, the Presbyterian Synod issued a pastoral letter with a strikingly different tone:
  - “We cannot help congratulating you on the general and almost universal attachment of the Presbyterian body to the cause of liberty and the rights of mankind.”
  - “The Synod, therefore, request you to render thanks to Almighty God... in a particular manner for establishing the Independence of the United States of America.”
- **Questions** 1) How is this change of perspective understandable?  
2) Was it healthy for the church to identify like this with the cause of the Revolution?

### How else did American Presbyterianism change after the American Revolution?

- By 1789, the church had grown to 177 ministers, 16 presbyteries and 420 churches. This was too big for one synod, and so the church established a national General Assembly, 4 synods, and 16 presbyteries.
- The church also revised the *Westminster Confession of Faith* to remove those portions which gave the civil authorities any say in the administration or discipline of the church.

### How did the opening of the western frontier affect American Presbyterianism?

- An old Scottish tradition of “communion seasons” transformed into revivalist “camp meetings”:
  - In 17<sup>th</sup> century Scotland, Presbyterians had developed a tradition of celebrating the Lord’s Supper once a year outdoors, after several days of gathering for preparatory preaching and instruction.
  - This tradition likely became the original basis for the American frontier “camp meetings.”
- One leader of these “camp meetings” was a Presbyterian pastor named Barton Stone. In 1801, Stone organized an extraordinary camp meeting at a place called Cane Ridge that attracted thousands, and at which “I saw at least five hundred swept down in a moment, as if a battery of a thousand guns had been opened upon them; and then immediately followed by shrieks and shouts that rent the very heavens.”
- At some point, camp meetings began to include an “altar call” – calling persons feeling conviction of their sin to come to the front of the assembly to receive Jesus.

### How were Presbyterians involved in the Second Great Awakening of the 1820-30s?

- As early as 1816, the General Assembly recorded new waves of spiritual awakenings in PA and NY
- In 1826, a Presbyterian minister named Charles Finney began introducing “new measures” for revival:
  - Holding revival services in a town without invitation from local ministers
  - Long, nightly church meetings
  - The “anxious bench” (similar to the “altar call”)
- In 1830-1831, during a crusade in Rochester, NY, Finney linked conversion to Christ with support for the local temperance society. He was not the only one who began linking revivals to social reforms:

“A variety of reform endeavors sprung up that the revivals energized. Protestants, with Presbyterians often playing a significant role, formed voluntary societies for advancing education, wholesome literature, Sunday schools, the observance of the Lord’s Day, missions, Bible and tract distribution, as well as temperance, the abolition of slavery, prison reform, and even healthy diets... [The Second Great Awakening] was the singular organizing mechanism of a nation that was young and lacking in the sort of civil associations necessary for a well-ordered society, especially in the rapidly expanding West.” (114)

### What major themes in our tradition do we see emerging during this period?

- Political and social activism gets into Presbyterian DNA – setting up later conflict over the “social gospel.”
- Success leads American Christians, including Presbyterians, to get used to wielding political/social power.
- **Questions** 1) How might this be wholesome (Mt. 5:14)? Dangerous (Jn. 13:15, 2 Cor. 10:3-4)?  
2) How are these developments still with us today?