

THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN PRESBYTERIANISM

LESSON ONE

“AMERICAN PRESBYTERIANISM 101”

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1. Title of class “The History of American Presbyterianism”
 - What we *will* and *will not* focus on:
 - We will focus on Presbyterianism *in America*, not in Europe
 - We will focus on the *American* Presbyterian Church, not European transplants to America—the Covenanters (Reformed Presbyterians) and the Seceders (Associate Reformed Presbyterians)
 - Re: the American Presbyterian Church:
 - Is an *orphan* not a *transplant*; it was created without the oversight or support of Old World churches
 - Began in 1706 when seven ministers assembled in Philadelphia for mutual edification and to ordain another man to the ministry
 - That meeting was the first presbytery of the American presbyterian church
 - So if it began in 1706, in 2006, it celebrated its 300th anniversary
 - Our study of this 300 year history will be not be a detailed study but a survey, with appr. 14 lessons
 - We can only skim the surface and highlight the most important people, events and lessons to be learned from the history.
 - Textbook – *Seeking a Better Country: 300 Years of American Presbyterianism*
 - Published (2007) after 300th anniversary of American presbyterian church

- Not a *celebration of* but a *critical reflection on* the history of American Presbyterianism
- “Our purpose is to help contemporary and future Presbyterians connect the dots between their own experiences in particular communions and the generations of Presbyterians who preceded them” (p. viii, near the end of the top paragraph).
- Hart and Muether says that this book is not a celebration of the church’s past; rather, “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 ... 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” (p. 10, last paragraph).

2. Purpose of the Class (Four Objectives)

- To understand the history that has shaped the identity and culture of the OPC
- To understand the identity and culture of PPC as a local congregation of the OPC
- To learn from the *successes* and *failures* of the past. “Those who don’t remember the past are doomed to repeat it.”
- To evaluate the state of our own congregation in light of the lessons that we learn from our study of the history of American presbyterianism

3. Defining Terms

- Hart and Muether provide a brief “Presbyterian Primer” on pp. 2–4.
 - First, they look at the definition of the term “presbyterianism.”
 - Their point is that presbyterianism needs to be defined historically and not simply in terms of abstract ideals.
- So let’s start with the meaning of the term presbyterianism.

- What is presbyterianism?
- A form of church government (polity) in which presbyters (elders) exercise rule
- Elders rule through a series of graded courts
 - from the session/consistory (locally),
 - presbyteries/classes and synods (regionally),
 - to the GA/synod as the body representing the whole church
- Different from an episcopal polity (hierarchical)
- And from a congregational polity (democratic)
- But polity is only part of what distinguishes presbyterians from other Christians and possibly not even a major feature.
- Presbyterianism is also distinguished from other groups by its theology.
- In the Protestant Reformation, there were three major branches of Protestantism that became part of the state-church order in Western Europe:
 - Lutherans, Anglicans and Reformed
- Presbyterians were synonymous with Reformed
 - “Reformed” is shorthand for “reformed according to the Word of God” in theology, worship and polity
- Reformed theology, worship and polity were codified in confessions and catechisms in the 16th and 17th centuries
 - The most important set in Presbyterianism was produced by the Westminster Assembly:
 - The WCF, LC, SC; also FG and DPW

- Our theology, worship and polity are all essential parts of the definition of presbyterianism.
- But the term “presbyterian” cannot be defined merely as a body of ideas or a set of practices without reference to history.
 - “Definitions of Presbyterianism only make sense in the light of historical experience ... 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” (p. 4, second and last sentences of top paragraph).
 - Abstract notions of presbyterianism can run into difficulty when the ideals don’t line up exactly with historical realities
 - Presbyterianism does have a set of ideals, but it also has a history.
 - It is possible to make judgements on the historical realities in light of the ideals (and we will do that in this class), but the realities themselves are part of the history of presbyterianism just as much as the ideals.
 - “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” (p. 4, end of middle paragraph).
- So that’s the gist of the section entitled “Presbyterian Primer” on pp. 2–4
 - The definition of the term “presbyterian” should take into account
 - both the abstract ideals and the historical realities associated with the term
 - bearing in mind that those two things do not always line up

4. Presbyterianism and Calvinism

- Hart and Muether follow this with another section entitled “Presbyterians and Calvinism” (pp. 4–6)

- Here, they note that historically, the founders of presbyterianism were defenders of Calvinism
 - But we can't say without qualifications that presbyterians are Calvinists
- For one thing, Calvinism is often defined by a few key doctrines, the 5 points of Calvinism: TULIP
- Also, other Protestants (besides presbyterians) have held to these key doctrines: e.g. Particular/Calvinistic Baptists.
- Furthermore, not all presbyterians have been Calvinists: e.g. Cumberland Presbyterians or PCUSA
 - Both groups are presbyterian, in some sense, but neither group holds to Calvinism.
 - Both groups have a presbyterian polity and trace their roots to the historical development of presbyterianism in America and Europe.
 - So in some ways, they may be legitimately considered presbyterian, though they do not hold to the doctrines of Calvinism
- The point, of course, is that not all who call themselves presbyterian are Calvinists, even though that may be true historically.
 - The reality doesn't always match the ideal

5. Presbyterianism and Puritanism

- On pp. 6–7, you will find a section entitled “Presbyterians and Puritans” (pp. 6–7)
- Here, the authors make the point that it would be historically inaccurate not to distinguish between presbyterians and puritans.
- The two groups are not identical, though they share some things in common
 - Both groups were part of the Reformed wing of the Reformation and were both Calvinistic in doctrine, but after this, the two groups diverge

- “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” (p. 6, middle paragraph).
- The Presbyterian Church in Great Britain was initially separate from the Church of England.
- In the 17th century, the two groups found themselves on the same side in the political struggles among the English monarchy, Parliament and Scotland
 - But at other times, their interests differed.
- Immigrants to the US with Presbyterian backgrounds were from Scotland or Ireland, and they formed a distinct group from the Puritans of New England.
 - “...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” (p. 7, top paragraph).
- So the point of this section is that we need to keep in mind that presbyterians and puritans were two different groups
 - While they held some things in common and, at times, found themselves on the same side of struggles, they were, nevertheless, two different groups
 - The Scottish and Irish presbyterian immigrants to America formed a distinct group from the puritans of New England

6. *American* Presbyterianism

- The last section of the introduction is entitled “Presbyterians and America” (pp. 7–10)
- Here, the authors distinguish between the presbyterian church that developed in America in the early 1700s and the presbyterian church in Europe
- The original membership of the Presbyterian churches in America was overwhelmingly Scottish or Scotch-Irish, but the presbyterianism that developed in America was significantly different from Scottish or Irish presbyterianism “because of the unique set of circumstances that presbyterians encountered in America” (p. 7, middle paragraph).
- *Seeking a Better Country* focuses on the history of the American presbyterian church, rather than on the European roots of presbyterianism or on the presbyterian transplants to 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” (p. 7, end of middle paragraph and last paragraph).

7. Three Main Periods

- The history of the American presbyterian church can be divided into 3 main periods:
- First period (1706 – 1789) colonial period
 - From the 1st presbytery founded in Philadelphia in 1706 to the 1st GA in 1789
 - The Presbyterian church struggled with 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?” (p. 8, middle of middle paragraph).
- Second period (1789 – 1869)
 - From the 1st GA (1789) to the 1860s “when American Presbyterians decided to exist independently in regional churches that were divided by the politics of the Civil War” (p. 8, last paragraph).
 - “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” (p. 8, bottom of page).
- Third period (1869 – 1983)
 - From the 1869 reunion of the Old and New Schools [in the North] to the reunion in 1983 of northern and southern Presbyterianism
 - “This era was marked by interdenominational cooperation and the pursuit of formal ecumenical ties among Protestants of all kinds, and later between Protestants and Roman Catholics” (p. 9, end of second paragraph).
- Those are the three main periods of Presbyterian history in America.