

THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN
LESSON THREE
THE LIFE AND MINISTRY OF FRANCIS MAKEMIE
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1. The Humble Origins of Presbyterianism in America

- Today, most people would not think of the presbyterian church as a church on the margins of society but as a respectable, prestigious and even powerful church.
- The word “presbyterianism” might even suggest: a heritage that is rich in historical and cultural accomplishments, a church that influenced the political life of Britain in the 17th c. and played a pivotal role in the founding of our country in the 18th c.

“American Presbyterians are by most standards an impressive group. Of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence, Presbyterians accounted for 11, and in the person of John Witherspoon boasted the only minister to have his name recorded on the nation’s founding document” (p. 1, top paragraph).

- Presbyterians have also had an impressive showing in politics, cultural life, entertainment, science and business. We might mention, e.g., Andrew Jackson, James Buchanan, Grover Cleveland, Ronald Reagan, Mark Twain, Jimmy Stewart, Dick Van Dyke, C. Everett Koop, Andrew Carnegie and Sam Walton. The point is that the presbyterian church in America has had a number of influential and powerful members.
- But in the beginning, it was not so. To the contrary, the American presbyterian church had a rather precarious, unpretentious and modest beginning.
- Of course, presbyterianism was never meant to be a religion for the affluent, the successful, and the powerful. In fact, presbyterianism was primarily a religion for those on the margins of society—at least it was in the beginning. In many ways, having a marginal status as a church went hand in hand with presbyterian theology. Consider, for example, the words of Paul in 1 Cor. 1:26–29,

For consider your calling, brothers, that *there were* not many wise according to the flesh [by human standards], not many mighty [powerful], not many noble [of noble birth, high social status]. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world in order to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world in order to shame the mighty, and God has chosen the base things [insignificant] of the world and the despised things, *even* the things that are not, so that he might destroy the things that are, so that no flesh might boast before God.

- Presbyterianism began as a church on the margins of society, and there were not many wise (by worldly standards) or powerful or noble people who aligned themselves with the presbyterian church. Of course, that would change with time, but Hart and Muether question whether the church was better off when it did not have a seat at the table of culture and society. With a seat at the table, it is in a position to influence civil affairs and shape culture and society (hopefully for the better), but Hart and Muether question whether that was ever the aim of the church to begin with.
- What we will discover as we continue our study of the American presbyterian church is that there have been two competing philosophies about the relationship between the church and society.
- One philosophy is known as transformationalism. Transformationalism sees the aim of the church as transforming society, redeeming culture, Christianizing the world (Constantinianism). Transformationalists are seeking to make their country better.
- The other philosophy emphasizes that we are strangers and exiles on the earth, that here we have no abiding city, that our hope is the heavenly kingdom of Christ which is not of this world. So rather than seeking to make the country better, this group is seeking a better country. I'm not sure what to call this second philosophy. Perhaps, since it emphasizes our alien status, we can call it alienism. So we have transformationalism vs. alienism (Transformers vs. Aliens).
- The humble origins of the American presbyterian church was more agreeable to alienism than to transformationalism, and most of its original ministers were not transformationalists. "The original Presbyterians in America were not ambitious, nor did their resources promise an auspicious church to emerge from their disorganized beginnings" (p. 31, middle of first full paragraph). So let's look now more closely at the origins of the American presbyterian church and focus our attention, first of all, on the key figure who founded the church

2. Francis Makemie

- Makemie was an Irish immigrant, born in Ulster in northern Ireland in 1658 about 10 years after the Westminster Assembly produced what would become the constitutional standards of the Presbyterian church. The province of Ulster was one of the Presbyterian strongholds in Europe (the other being Scotland).
- He was educated at the University of Glasgow and ordained as a gospel minister in Northern Ireland in 1682. The following year (1683), he came to the American colonies as a Presbyterian missionary. He travelled extensively throughout the colonies visiting North Carolina, Maryland, Virginia and New England.
- In the 1680s, for a variety of circumstances, many Scottish Presbyterians migrated to the New World, and Presbyterian communities started to form in various places, especially in New Jersey and the Carolinas
- Within his first two years of ministry in the New World, Makemie had established four Presbyterian congregations in Maryland. For most of his ministry, he functioned as an itinerant missionary, “primarily on the Chesapeake Bay’s eastern shore, but also in Virginia, with occasional trips to preach to groups of believers in the Carolinas” (p. 27, top of page).
- He engaged in shipping and trade to make a living, while traveling to the small congregations of Presbyterians. He was bi-vocational because his congregations were financially unable to support a minister
- Makemie preached in Maryland, Delaware and Virginia, even though the official church in Virginia was the (Episcopal) Church of England. In 1689, the English Parliament passed an Act of Toleration, which gave new rights to religious dissenters, allowing them to register their meeting houses and license their ministers to preach. The following year (1699), Makemie persuaded the Virginia legislature to accord similar freedom to him, and he was licensed (by the county court) to preach in Virginia.
- In 1706, Makemie helped bring together a group of seven Presbyterian ministers to function as a presbytery and, as its first act, it ordained a man to the ministry. Makemie was elected as the moderator of the presbytery. Since this was the first presbytery to form in the New World, historians use this event to mark the birth of the American Presbyterian church.

- The presbytery met in Philadelphia (hence, the Presbytery of Philadelphia). Philadelphia was run by Quakers, who practiced religious toleration according to the convictions of William Penn.

“This made the city, and the colony of which it was the commercial hub, a place teeming with various Protestant groups, from Moravians and Lutherans to Mennonites and Presbyterians. The city’s ethnic diversity was indeed stunning for the time, and the Scotch-Irish who came to British North America through the port of Philadelphia bore all the marks of immigration’s harsh circumstances. Philadelphia, then, was one of the few cities that could be a home for Presbyterianism. Boston conformed to the established Congregationalist churches; Williamsburg, Virginia, was firmly Episcopalian; and New York City was still sorting through the rival claims of the Church of England and the Dutch Reformed” (p. 14, middle paragraph).

- This was the official birth of American Presbyterianism. The American presbyterian church was an orphan in that it did not have oversight from any church in the Old World.

The “American Presbyterian Church was different [than the Dutch and German Reformed churches in America], even novel, in the history of Reformed Christianity in the US. It began virtually at the initiative of New World ministers who were without substantial accountability either to ecclesiastical or political bodies in the Old World” (p. 25, top of page).

- Shortly after the first presbytery met in Philadelphia, Makemie headed to New England to promote the new denomination and appeal to the New Englanders to send ministers to the middle colonies. While passing through New York in January 1707, Makemie was arrested by the Colonial Governor of New York for preaching without a license. Makemie tried to preach in the pulpit of a Dutch Reformed congregation, but the authorities forbade [him] from preaching. So he led services in a private home in the city (p. 27, bottom of page).
- Though Anglicanism was the official religion, there were many dissenters who preached different doctrine, including Puritans, Quakers, and Presbyterians on Long Island, and Makemie, as we noted, had been licensed to preach as a dissenter in Virginia and Maryland. In New York, however, Makemie was arrested for preaching without a license and spent several weeks in jail. One history I have says 6 weeks in jail; Hart and Muether state that the legal proceedings lasted nearly five months, all of which he spent in jail (p. 27, bottom of page).

- Makemie’s defense was based on the Toleration Act of 1689 and the protections it guaranteed for Protestant dissenters under English rule. Though he was eventually acquitted (June of 1707), he was ordered to pay the very expensive cost of his prosecution. His trial was highly publicized, and his acquittal was seen (and still is to this day) as a landmark decision in the evolution of religious liberty in America. It caused the New York legislature to enact legislation to prevent such prosecution again in the future.
- Hart and Muether note that Makemie’s trial, “was another aspect of the difficulties that Presbyterianism faced in gaining a foothold on North American soil, in this case legal and political, rather than merely human and financial” (p. 27, last full paragraph).
- Just as significant, however, is the role that this story would play in shaping the nation’s position on religious liberty and in motivating presbyterians to support the revolutionary war. Presbyterian ministers became known as the black regiment (or the black robed regiment because they wore black robes) during the revolutionary war. Rumor has it that King George III called the revolutionary war “the presbyterian revolt.” By the time of the war, the presbyterian church had become a denomination made up primarily of transformationalists.
- On the significance Makemie’s trial, Hart and Muether write, “During the late eighteenth century this incident would become a staple in the case for Presbyterianism’s support for freedom of religion. Just as pertinent, however, was not simply the intolerance of ecclesiastical establishment. Makemie’s submission to the penalty of law, no matter how seemingly unfair, was a wound that Presbyterians during the American Revolution often recalled to oppose English plans to install an Anglican bishop in North America” (p. 28, near the bottom).
- Makemie died soon after the ordeal (summer of 1708).

3. Jedediah Andrews

- At the end of the chapter, Hart and Muether, introduce another presbyterian minister who was instrumental in forming the American presbyterian church: Jedediah Andrews (1674–1747)
- Andrews was born in Massachusetts (1674) and graduated from Harvard in 1695. In 1698, he came to Philadelphia and preached in a building which had been used as a storeroom by the “Barbados Company.” He was probably ordained in the fall of 1701

- His congregation was the first, and for many years, the only Presbyterian Church in the city. The church was in some sense, Congregational, but in 1706, it became part of the American Presbyterian church. Andrews was one of the 7 ministers to attend the first presbytery in Philadelphia
- Hart and Muether are pointing out that Scotland and Northern Ireland were not the only regions from which the American Presbyterian church received her ministers. New England was another region, and Andrews is a prime example of the influence of New England theology (New England Puritanism) on the American Presbyterian church.
- Andrews' congregation, however, was heavily influenced by the steady influx of Scotch-Irish immigrants to Philadelphia. But of the 7 ministers who attended the first presbytery meeting in Philadelphia, Andrews was the only minister who had not been educated or ordained in Scotland or Ireland
- In 1704 or 1705, the congregation had grown large enough to build their own building, which would be the site of the first presbytery meeting in 1706
- Hart and Muether will have much more to say about Andrews and the significance of New England Puritanism in the following chapters. Here, they merely introduce Andrews to demonstrate the eclectic nature of the American Presbyterian church from the beginning (it was a melting pot) and especially to demonstrate the New England connection with American Presbyterianism.
- Two characteristics of New England Puritanism will have an enormous impact on the American Presbyterian church in the years that followed the formation of the denomination.
- One is transformationalism, which we have already mentioned. The New England Puritans were transformationalists to the core. You've probably heard of John Winthrop's 1630 sermon entitled "A Model of Christian Charity." Winthrop proclaimed that the colonists who formed a settlement in Massachusetts Bay would be "a city upon a hill," watched by the world. Winthrop's sermon gave rise to the widespread belief in American folklore that the United States of America is "God's country," the new Jerusalem
- The other characteristic is experientialism. This is a new topic that is featured prominently in chapter two of the book, "In Search for Presbyterian Identity". Experientialism is, as one author has defined it, "a pietistic philosophy which emphasizes the importance of emotional and mystical experience in the lives of believers. The goal of this philosophy is to cause people to experience the Gospel in a deeply personal and

devotional way. The means by which this is achieved is through preaching that is focused on bringing people to intensely feel or experience their need for Christ. This is accomplished through preaching that is focused heavily on the Law and sin. This ... philosophy teaches that it is necessary to bring people to depths self-despair, misery for sin, spiritual mourning, and deep repentance so that they will “flee” to Christ from God’s wrath.”

- Experientialism is set in contrast to confessionalism. The experientialists emphasized personal piety, godliness and deep emotional experiences; the confessionalists emphasized doctrinal fidelity to the theological standards of the church.
- Experientialists believed that personal piety and holiness were enough to qualify a man for ordination to gospel ministry; confessionalists believed that a prerequisite to ordination was subscribing the confessional standards of the church. These two groups (the experientialists and the confessionalists) vigorously debated this issue, and it was one of the factors that eventually divided the church.
- On the experientialism and transformationalism of the New England Puritans, Mark Noll writes the following,

“Almost as soon as they arrived, the Massachusetts ministers and magistrates agreed on a more visible measure of conversion than they had practiced in England. Now a new stress was placed on relating an experience of conversion as a prerequisite for full church membership. In the Old World, merely choosing to associate with the Puritans had set people apart; in the New World it seemed necessary to encourage a higher standard. Prospective members were expected to accept Puritan doctrines and live moral lives, but they were also expected to confess before their fellows that they had experienced God's saving grace. Those who could testify credibly to their redemption in this way joined together to form churches by covenanting with each other. The stroke of genius, which transformed ecclesiastical purity into social purity [i.e. experientialism into transformationalism], was to open the franchise only to those males who had become full members of covenanted churches. ... To put it in the Puritans' own terms, the covenant of grace qualified a person for church membership and a voting role in the colony's public life. This public life fulfilled the social covenant with God, since the leaders selected by the church members promoted laws that honored the Scriptures. Moreover, the church covenant linked converted individuals to the social project without requiring the burden of a church-state machinery such as the one that had persecuted them in England. New England was, thus, no theocracy, where ministers exercised direct control of public life. It was, however, a place where magistrates frequently called upon the reverend fathers for advice, including how best they might promote the religious life of the colonies.”

