

Presbyterians: Past, Present, Future
Session Four
Presbyterians Before the American Revolution

A little quiz for discussion with the folks nearby:

1. At a Church of England church in England in the 1700's, who provided the money to pay the pastor?
2. At Cooks Creek, who provides the money to pay the pastor?
3. In the U.S. in 2022, what government approvals do you need to start a church or start preaching?
4. What percentage of Americans were members of a church in 1750?
5. What percentage of Americans were members of a church in 2000?

The First Presbytery

While Presbyterians settled in virtually all of America in the 17th century, most Presbyterians settled in the middle colonies of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania where they were mostly tolerated.

Established Church

vs.

Voluntary Church

Government sponsorship

No gov't sponsorship

Government funding

No gov't funding

Government control

No gov't control

Usually hierarchical/state control over clergy

No gov't influence w/clergy

The first presbytery was organized in Philadelphia in 1706. A presbytery is a group of congregations within a geographic area organized to provide for ministry and church governance. A minister is a member of the presbytery, not the congregation.

- The initial purpose was to "consult the most proper measure for advancing religion and propagating Christianity" in the American wilderness.
- Although they were independent of any foreign ties, they seemed to use the procedures of the Church of Scotland in their organization.
- They gathered for moral support, deepening their faith, disciplining members, stimulating professional development, and examine candidates for ordinations. These are all things that presbyteries still do (or should do!) today.

At the second presbytery meeting, they adopted these goals:

*Overtures proposed to the Presbytery & agreed upon, for propagating the
interest of religion:*

First that evry minister in their respective congregations read & comment upon a chapter of the bible every Lords day, as discretion and ye circumstance of tyme, place, & c. will admit.

Second over: that it be recommended to evry minister of the Presbytery to set on foot & encourage private christian societies.

Third over: That evry minister of the Presbytery supplie neighbouring desolate places where a minister is wanting & opportunity of doing good offers.

Presbyterian clergy assumed the freedom to organize and the right to worship, to preach and teach, and to administer the sacraments. Presbyterians made no efforts for the establishment of the Presbyterian church in the colonies.

Robert Makemie vs. Lord Cornbury: Makemie (see last week's handout) arrived in America and obtained a license to preach. After a meeting of the presbytery in New York, Lord Cornbury, the governor of New York, forbade Makemie from preaching in New York, because Makemie and all Presbyterians were trouble, as far as Cornbury was concerned. Cornbury said the Toleration Act of 1689 (see last week) didn't apply in the colonies. Makemie argued it did. No matter, he went into a private house, opened the windows and doors, and preached from it. Cornbury through Makemie in jail for this act. Makemie won his court case and became a hero amongst Christian dissenters, publishing *A Narrative of a New and Unusual American Imprisonment* in 1707.

The First Synod

As Presbyterian grew in number, the first presbytery organized itself into the Synod of Philadelphia in 1716 and created the presbyteries of Philadelphia, New Castle, Long Island, and Snow Hill (which never came to fruition).

As more immigrants arrived and pushed to the frontier, the moral quality of all were called into question and the Presbyterian Church worked hard to supply solid ministerial leadership and provide for the moral uprightness of all. Many local Sessions acted as moral courts in the absence of any organized civil life on the frontier.

A report sent by an Episcopal clergyman about his colleagues in 1724: "Mr. Williamson is grown notorious and consummate in villainy. He really is an original for drinking and swearing. Mr. Donaldson is so vile that the other day, being sent for to a dying person, came drunk, and the poor expiring soul, seeing his hopeful parson in that condition, refused the Sacrament at his hands and died without it. Mr. Maconchie is a mere nuisance, and makes ye church stink. He fights, and drinks on all occasions, and as I am told [forces his attentions on the wives of others].

From that extreme to this big finish: The Presbytery of New Castle censured Alexander Hutchison for bathing on the Lord's Day. Your pastor's official position is that bathing is encouraged before coming to worship :)