

# THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN

## LESSON FOUR

### CONFESSING THE FAITH

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The previous two lessons were biographical in nature. They focused on the life and ministry of two people: John Knox (the father of Scottish Presbyterianism) and Francis Makemie (the father of American Presbyterianism). Today, we are going to focus not on a particular person but on an event—the Adopting Act of 1729.

This was when the American Presbyterian Church officially adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith as an expression of the faith held in common by all its ministers. I.e. the Westminster Confession became the corporate faith of the American Presbyterian Church when the church adopted it as its confession of faith.

When the OPC started, we adopted the Westminster Confession as the corporate faith of the denomination. And to this day, all officers (ministers, elders and deacons) are required to subscribe the Confession of Faith in their ordination vows. The first vow they take is: Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice? The second vow that all officers in the OPC take is: Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures?

We believe the scriptures, and we receive and adopt the confession as a faithful summary of the scriptures. The scriptures are our primary standard (the highest and only infallible authority). The confession and catechisms form our secondary standards, subordinate to scripture, fallible, amendable—but reliable guides to and summaries of the scriptures. So as we look at the Adopting Act of 1729, we are looking at the historical event that provided the precedent for the OPC's at the second GA in 1936.

#### 1. The Early Growth of the American Presbyterian Church

The Church began in 1706 with the first Presbytery meeting in Philadelphia. The size of the church was very small—only 7 ministers and 1 Presbytery. Within 10 years, the number of ministers grew from 7 to 16. And the number of presbyteries had grown from 1 to 3.

During this time, the presbyteries functioned a lot like ministerial associations. They met usually only once a year, primarily for mutual edification, but they also ordained and received new ministers into the denomination. So in terms of conducting the work of the church, the presbytery was responsible for examining, licensing and ordaining men to preach.

This is the reason why our presbyteries (in the OPC) carry out the task of examination, licensure and ordination of ministers. That's the way it developed historically in the American Presbyterian Church. And that practice has continued for over 300 years. The Presbytery was the foundational ruling body in the Church, and higher governing bodies (like synods and general assemblies) did not appear until later. So the Presbytery came first, and it conducted all the work of the regional church, and that established the basic pattern of the role of the Presbytery for centuries to come.

Another prerogative that the Presbytery would assume is the right to review and correct (when necessary) the proceedings of the sessions of local churches. In 1714, the sessions of local churches were ordered to maintain a record of their proceedings and to submit their minutes to their presbyteries for review. Sessions can and do sometimes err, and it's important that larger governing assemblies review and, if needed, correct the errors of sessions. Of course, presbyteries can err too. Governing bodies of any size can; they are all fallible institutions. Larger assemblies, however, are less likely to do so than smaller ones (usually).

This is the principle stated, for example, in Prov. 11:14 "Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety." It's also the pattern of apostolic practice in the NT church. E.g. the dispute in the church in Antioch (a local church) was brought before the larger assembly in Jerusalem for adjudication (Acts 15). And the decision of the Jerusalem council was binding on all the local churches—not just the church in Antioch.

Likewise, in Presbyterianism, larger governing assemblies review and correct (when necessary) the proceedings of lower governing assemblies. Presbyteries review and approve the minutes of Sessions. And General Assemblies review and approve the minutes of Presbyteries. Every year, our Session has to submit its minutes to the Presbytery for review and approval. And every year, our Presbytery submits its minutes to the GA. The session is the governing body of the local church; the presbytery, the governing body of the regional church. And the two are arranged as a series of graded courts: the presbytery being the higher court and the session the lower court.

In 1717, the new denomination formed the first Synod (the Synod of Philadelphia) as the governing body over the three presbyteries. And near the end of the century (1789), it formed the General Assembly as the governing body over the national church. So a graded series of ruling bodies developed over the course of the century: sessions, presbyteries, synods and the general assembly. In the OPC, we do not have a fourfold series of courts but a threefold series; we have

sessions, presbyteries and the general assembly (no synods). Our denomination is currently small enough that it really doesn't need synods. It's easy enough for us to have a GA once a year.

The similarity between Presbyterian government and the civil government of the U.S. has often been pointed out, and some have argued that Presbyterianism strongly influenced the form of our country's govt. While Presbyterians certainly played a role in shaping the govt. of the U.S., we want to be careful not to overstate their influence. Most of the founding fathers were not Presbyterian. In fact, most of them were antagonistic towards Presbyterian theology. So the two forms of government (our church's govt. and our country's govt.) are similar, but that does not necessarily mean one was patterned after the other. That's enough on the early growth of the American Presbyterian Church.

## 2. The Diversity of the Church

As the number of ministers and churches grew in the denomination, so did the number of presbyteries. By 1717, there were 16 ministers, around 18 congregations, and 3 presbyteries. The whole denomination was about the same size as the Presbytery of the Southwest (which is 1 of 17 presbyteries in the OPC). The authors give us a brief description of the presbyteries in the year 1717, which provides a good snapshot of the church. It gives us a sense of what the church was like.

The Presbytery of Philadelphia (Pennsylvania) had 6 ministers: 2 ministers from England, 1 from Wales, 1 from Scotland, 1 from Northern Ireland, and 1 from New England. The Presbytery of New Castle (Delaware) had 8 ministers: 4 Scotch-Irish, 3 from Scotland, 1 from Wales. So this Presbytery had the strongest connection to Scotland and Northern Ireland. The Presbytery of Long Island (New York) had 2 ministers: 1 from New England, 1 from Northern Ireland. A Presbytery of two ministers is ridiculously small. Pretty soon, however, this Presbytery would become the largest of the three. And, just as important, it was the most hospitable Presbytery to ministers from New England, which means that Puritanism and congregationalism would end up having a strong influence on this Presbytery.

Between 1717 and 1729, twenty-seven new ministers were ordained in the Presbyterian Church. In 12 years, the number of ministers went from 16 to 43. Just as important is the fact that many of these new ministers came from New England. The result, of course, was an increase of Puritan and congregational influences on the Presbyterian Church, especially in the vicinity of New York City (primarily Long Island and Northern New Jersey).

By the time of the Adopting Act in 1729, the church had grown to 6 times its size when it began in 1706. The growth of the church also increased the theological and cultural diversity of the denomination. And this diversity was an important factor in the disputes that occurred in the

church in the 1720s and 1730s, which led to an official split in 1741—the Old Side/New Side division. As an example of this diversity in the church, the authors mention three ministers, who represent three different schools of thought in the denomination. The three ministers are William Tennent Sr., John Thomson and Jonathan Dickinson.

Tennent represents a strain of Presbyterianism that is more informal and subjective. We might call this strain pietism or experientialism. This became the dominant strand in the denomination during the Great Awakening. Tennent and his followers formed the revivalist party—the biggest supporters of the New Side and the biggest critics of the Old Side.

John Thomson represents a strain of Presbyterianism that is more formal and doctrinally precise and less individualistic and experiential. His Presbyterianism was more ecclesial and confessional than that of the experientialists. Thomson was the leader of the confessional presbyterians (the confessionalists or creedalists)—a group that advocated subscribing the Confession as a requirement for all ministers in the church. The confessionalists were the biggest critics of the Awakening and, therefore, of the New Side Presbyterians like the Tennents.

Jonathan Dickinson represents a strain of Presbyterianism that is more congregational, like the churches in New England. Dickinson was a third generation New Englander. He was leery of the abuse of power and was particularly fearful of higher assemblies exercising rule over lower assemblies (specifically the power of the Synod over the presbyteries and churches). He was also opposed to the idea of requiring ministers to subscribe the Confession of Faith. He saw this as a violation of liberty of conscience, another abuse of power. Dickinson was antagonistic towards the views of Thomson. Like the Tennents, Dickinson was supportive of the revivals in the 1730s and 1740s, but (like Jonathan Edwards) he was critical of their excesses. The group represented by Dickinson formed an alliance with the group represented by Tennent against the confessionalists.

Ultimately, these three strands of Presbyterianism end up forming two distinct parties: one emphasizing order and subscription; the other, freedom and experience. But during the 1720s two distinct parties within the American church began to emerge. One of these looked more conservative in the sense that it stressed order, uniformity, and the importance of doctrine. The other, in contrast, appeared to be more tolerant and emphasized freedom and the primacy of experience (bottom of p. 40 and top of p. 41).

This theological and cultural diversity and the polarization of the church into two parties made it difficult for the new church to agree on certain issues, including one of the most important issues they faced in the 1720s, namely, “What do we believe?” Prior to 1729, the church was unable to give an answer to that question because it had no official corporate confession of faith, a statement of faith held in common by all its members. And that takes us to the Adopting Act of 1729, which is when the church gave an official answer to the question, “What do we believe?”

### 3. The Adopting Act of 1729

Presbyterian ministers who came from Europe were accustomed to subscribing the Westminster Confession of Faith [explain subscribing], so they were favorable to the idea of requiring ministers in the church to subscribe the standards. Presbyterian ministers who came from New England, however, objected to the practice of subscription. So these two groups took opposing sides in the 1720s when the church started considering the idea of creedal subscription.

The New England Puritans had no real objections to the Westminster Confession or to the idea of having confessions. In fact, they had confessional statements that were modified versions of the Westminster Confession. They did not, however, require subscription for ordination. So in the American Presbyterian Church in the 1720s, there were two minds on the propriety and necessity of ministers giving their assent to a common creed.

The Presbytery of New Castle (the stricter Presbyterian party) took the lead by requiring candidates for licensure to subscribe. Candidates were required to vow, “I do own the Westminster Confession as the Confession of my faith.” This was the practice of the New Castle Presbytery but not that of the whole church. That Presbytery, however, wanted to make it a requirement for all licentiates and ministers in the denomination. So it started to press the issue of creedal subscription, and John Thomson (moderator of the Presbytery and leader of the confessional party) submitted an overture to the Synod in 1727 that called on the church to adopt “publicly and authoritatively ... the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms” as the public confession of the church’s faith.

The Synod did not act on overture until 1729, but that year, it adopted the Confession and Catechisms as the official confession of the American Presbyterian Church—the Adopting Act. Thomson and his supporters were concerned over the impurity of the denomination in its doctrine and the dilution of its corporate witness. The efforts of Thomson and the New Castle Presbytery were met with resistance from the New Englanders (like Dickinson), who were opposed to the practice of subscription.

For Dickinson, the issue facing the church was not the theological fuzziness of the denomination but the danger of an authoritative governing body. Remember, the New England Puritans were Congregationalists, and they located the power of decision making in the local congregation’s officers. Presbyterians, in contrast, delegated church power to the Presbytery. So Dickinson and the other New Englanders who had joined the Presbyterian church were reluctant to delegate too much church power to Presbyteries or to the Synod.

Furthermore, Dickinson argued that subscription [which had been practiced in the church since 325, the Council of Nicea] was a curse not a blessing. The best means for protecting the church was not subscription but ‘strict’ examination of candidates, ‘strict’ discipline of

scandalous ministers, and the ‘diligent, faithful, and painful’ discharge of ministerial duties. As Charles Hodge put it, Dickinson ‘belonged to that small class of persons who are opposed to all creeds of human composition’ (p. 43, end of long middle paragraph). When “Synod proposed and accepted the Adopting Act of 1729 it appeared to signal a real defeat for the anti-subscription party, since the formula adopted did endorse and require subscription” (p. 44, second paragraph). But the Adopting Act was “not exactly what Thomson and the strict subscriptionists had in mind.” It was something of a compromise

It’s worthy pointing out that even though the Synod made a clear ruling on subscription, yet it is likely that the practice of subscription varied from presbytery to presbytery when men were being licensed and ordained. The Synod’s decision went a long way in bringing unity to the denomination in terms of its ordination requirements, but there was still quite a bit of diversity on the local level.

The Adopting Act of 1729 was a major step in the consolidation of an American Presbyterian Church. In addition to adopting the Confession and Catechism, the Synod also adopted the Directory for Worship, Discipline and Government, so the denomination now possessed the foundation for uniformity of worship and church polity. These documents formed the constitution of the church, as they still do today in the OPC.

#### 4. The Confession of Faith in the OPC

At the second GA of the OPC (Nov. 1936), our denomination adopted the Westminster Confession, Larger and Shorter Catechisms as the official corporate confession of the church’s faith. We do not treat these documents as out-of-date museum pieces, antiques from the ancient past, but as but as reliable guides to and faithful summaries of the teaching of scripture. And we actively seek to conform our practices and our preaching and teaching to our confessional standards because we believe they are biblical. As one of our ministers put it,

Confessions are not ... mere compendiums of systematic theologies from which we can pick and choose at leisure. They are not simply one man’s theology; they are the corporate church’s theology. As such, they should be embraced not only by her officers, but also by her members.

The Confession and Catechisms form the corporate witness of the whole church to the truth of God’s Word. We point to them and say, “This is what scripture teaches.” John Muether says,

The church as a whole [witnesses] to the truth through its constitutional documents. Ministers occupy pulpits in the church only with the endorsement of the church. “The preacher therefore speaks not only for himself but for the church.” If he were to preach

heresy it would be heresy for which the whole church would be responsible. The church must therefore be a doctrinally strict company through the instruments of its doctrinal standards.

The role that the Confession plays in the OPC is very different from its role in the mainline Presbyterian Church. In 1967, the PCUSA adopted a Book of Confessions, which included the Westminster Confession along with other ancient and contemporary confessions, and it altered the ordination vows for church officers. No longer was there the requirement to “sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.”

Instead ministers were to “perform the duties of a minister of the gospel in obedience to Christ, under the authority of the Scriptures, and the guidance of the confessions of this church.” These changes placed the Westminster Confession in a “creedal museum” (alongside of other ancient creeds) keeping it only because it was historic, not because it was true and biblical.