

A Pocket History of the PCA

History made simple for students and lay persons

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1. Introduction: A New Church

“I will build my church...” Matthew 16:18

Although the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) is not yet fifty years old, its history and roots are as old as American Presbyterianism itself. Hence, the founding of the PCA represents and is indicative of the continuing presence of Reformed Theology in the United States. This paper will trace the origin of the new denomination from early American Presbyterianism to its formal establishment in December 1973, and examine its subsequent progress. First, the early roots of the PCA will be considered, followed by an extended presentation of the key events in the decline and preparation that led to its founding. The final part of the paper will examine the ensuing growth of the PCA since its birth.

In December of 1973 delegates from 260 congregations comprised of over 41,000 members joined together to form a new denomination of the church of Jesus Christ, which would eventually be named the Presbyterian Church in America. Nearly all of these congregations came out of the Presbyterian church in the United States, which itself can be traced to the division of the PCUSA into northern and southern churches during the time of the Civil War. Moreover, this latter, somewhat political division had its roots in the division of the Old and New Schools, in 1837, over theological issues. Therefore, the appropriate place to begin tracing the PCA's origin is to examine the history of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

2. Presbyterianism Comes to America

“Go into all the world...” Mark 16:15

In 1706 Francis Makemie founded the first intercolonial general presbytery in the new world.¹ Commonly considered to be “the Father of American Presbyterianism,” Makemie arrived in Maryland in 1683.² In 1707, he was arrested, tried, and then acquitted for preaching without a license. These events served to gain sympathy and prominence for the new movement among many of the colonists, who were themselves political or religious dissenters of one sort or another. From the beginning, this early presbytery emphasized the importance of missionary work. The declared purpose of its original seven ministers was “for advancing religion and propagating Christianity.”³ At their second meeting, the men stated that their church “was to be and remain a missionary church.”⁴ In this missionary enterprise they were largely successful, for the first general synod was formed on the new continent in 1717.⁵ This Synod of Philadelphia was comprised of churches from Maryland to Long Island, consisting of three presbyteries and nineteen ministers.

The ministry of mercy was also an emphasis of the new Presbyterian church. At its first meeting the Synod created a benevolence fund, which they called a “fund for pious uses.”⁶ Considering the arrest of Makemie, it is not surprising that the church also placed a strong emphasis on the separation of Church and State. Accordingly, a sermon preached at the 1722 Synod declared that not even essential Christian doctrine could rightly be imposed by civil force.⁷ Slosser explains that due to persecution in their home countries,

¹ Some sources say 1705.

² Gaius Jackson Slosser, ed., *They Seek a Country* (Macmillian Company: New York, 1955), 32.

³ George P. Hutchinson, *The History Behind the Reformed Presbyterian Church Evangelical Synod* (Mack Publishing Co.: Cherry Hill, NJ, 1974), 110.

⁴ Slosser, *They Seek*, 38.

⁵ Some sources say 1716.

⁶ Slosser, *They Seek*, 40.

⁷ Hutchinson, *The History*, 112.

Presbyterian immigrants “brought with them a resulting hatred of political and religious tyranny which manifested itself in hostility both to monarchy and prelacy.” In fact, “Everywhere they were uncompromising advocates of the separation of church and state.”⁸

It is important to note that Presbyterians were in this country long before the founding of the first presbytery in the early 18th century. Yet throughout the 17th century they “were only a scattered and persecuted minority, tolerated in some places but generally unwelcome.”⁹ Until Makemie arrived, Presbyterians were without a leader and unable to unite due to national and ecclesiastical differences. Therefore, the majority of early Presbyterian churches were Congregational in association, while still being governed by a plurality of elders.

In the Adopting Act of 1729, the Synod formally adopted the Westminster Confession and Catechisms as its official doctrinal standards. The documents were unanimously embraced, minus “certain clauses in Chapters XX, and XXIII of the Confession relating to the power of the civil magistrate in ecclesiastical affairs, which clauses are unanimously rejected.”¹⁰ The decision to adopt the Westminster Standards enjoined that “all ministers of this Synod shall declare their acceptance of the Confession of Faith, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster as being in all essential and necessary articles good forms of sound words and systems of Christian Doctrine.”¹¹ It was left to the presbyteries to evaluate a man’s scruples to the standards, as what was “essential and necessary” was not defined. The 1736 Synod reaffirmed this Adopting Act, emphasizing that other than the rejected clauses, the Westminster standards were accepted “without the least variation or alteration.”¹²

⁸ Slosser, *They Seek*, 27-28.

⁹ Slosser, *They Seek*, 31.

¹⁰ Hutchinson, *The History*, 115.

¹¹ Slosser, *They Seek*, 41.

¹² Hutchinson, *The History*, 115.