

PRESBYTERIANS AND AMERICAN CULTURE

A History

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WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

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Introduction

Presbyterians, as educated and articulate members of the dominant cultural tradition in the United States, have played a major role in the history of the nation. At the turn of the twenty-first century, however, members of this religious tradition find themselves grappling with a crisis of identity, created, at least in part, because of the ways they have chosen to relate to broader trends in American culture. This work seeks to tell the story of that relationship from the early eighteenth century to the late twentieth century. It focuses especially on the mainline Presbyterian tradition, manifest currently in the Presbyterian Church (USA), and generally addresses other Presbyterian and Reformed communions insofar as they divided from or united with that larger stream.

I use the term “culture” here in the sense used by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who describes culture as “an historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols.” That is, this work explores how Presbyterian churches, and individuals rooted in those churches, influenced and were influenced by the values, attitudes, perspectives, beliefs, and ideals assumed by Americans in the course of American history.¹

Since their arrival on the shores of North America, Presbyterians have been actively engaged in the broader culture. Heirs to John Calvin’s concern to build a holy commonwealth, Presbyterians have sought, in the words of H. Richard Niebuhr, to “transform culture.” At the same time, Presbyterians have also been profoundly shaped by movements and trends in the culture. This is not to say that there is always strong conflict between Christian and non-Christian principles or ideals. Values derived from Christian convictions

and those rooted in non-Christian assumptions may certainly overlap. But they may also be starkly opposed.²

It is also important to recognize that teasing apart what is particularly Christian and what is American in the history of the church is not a simple endeavor. As historian Mark Noll has written, “Religion and culture do not coexist like pieces of bread in a sandwich; they are, rather, interwoven deeply one into the other.” At times the influence of church on the culture is more pronounced; at other times the influence of culture on the church seems to increase. Never are these influences completely unalloyed.³

During the colonial period in America, as historian Patricia Bonomi has shown, “the idiom of religion penetrated all discourse, underlay all thought, marked all observances, gave meaning to every public and private crisis.” This doesn’t mean that the colonies were Christian commonwealths. Rather, it is to acknowledge the significant influence of Protestantism on the culture, an influence that continued in important and diverse ways long past the colonial era. Indeed, historian Winthrop Hudson claimed that by the late nineteenth century America witnessed “one of the most successful penetrations of culture by a religious faith that the world has ever known.”⁴

At the same time, trends in the culture have impacted the way Christians in general and Presbyterians in particular have construed the faith. For example, attitudes of Presbyterians in America concerning race have often followed cultural trends more than scriptural precept. Likewise, in periods of war, cultural influences have tended to be particularly strong in shaping the attitudes of those in the church. Oftentimes, as Christians accommodated to the culture, they found their influence in the culture increasing. But this increasing role came at the cost of a distinctly Christian voice.⁵

As of late, many observers of the mainline churches in general and the Presbyterian Church in particular have argued that the church in late-twentieth-century America significantly accommodated itself to the prevailing culture and thereby had increasing difficulty articulating a clear identity. Sociologist Dean Hoge claimed, for example, that “tensions in Protestantism are a more or less direct outgrowth of the broader tensions in the culture. The life of the American Protestant Church today is more formed by the culture than vice versa”; and sociologist James Davison Hunter has recently argued that “in contemporary America, Christians have faith in God and, by and large, they believe and hold fast to the central truths of the Christian tradition. But while they have faith, *they have also been formed by the larger post-Christian culture*, a culture whose habits of life less and less resemble anything like the vision of human flourishing provided by the life of Christ and witness of scripture.” In 1993, theologian John Burgess looked at the “financial and ecclesiological crisis” of the Presbyterian Church and concluded, “The deeper struggle is

over the church's very identity. . . . Unclear identity has led to a struggle to define identity, and the denomination is now experiencing its own version of the culture wars." In seeking to address this crisis he concluded, "Because of its [the church's] identity in Jesus Christ, it cannot simply accommodate itself to the culture. It must seek the Christ who acts in the world."⁶

Inasmuch as we can always confuse the Christian faith with the values of the era in which we live, the study of history can offer a helpful perspective from which to examine the struggles of our own time. Presbyterians, particularly because they have been so influential in shaping the religious and cultural landscape of this nation, provide an illuminating case study of the way Christians have influenced and been influenced by the culture in the last three hundred years. The story here is told with a particularly Reformed and Presbyterian dialect. But the themes, trends, and movements described reflect a broader story of the ways that Protestantism and American culture have, for better or worse, interacted in this nation.

Growing Together, Falling Apart: The Birth of American Presbyterianism

In 1739 the renowned Anglican revivalist George Whitefield stormed into Philadelphia, the center of colonial Presbyterianism, and stunned observers by preaching outdoors to an estimated six thousand listeners. One of those present, Benjamin Franklin, noted that Whitefield had, an “extraordinary Influence . . . on his hearers.” Whitefield’s tour up the East Coast inspired numerous revivals, accompanied by varieties of emotional outbursts, and spurred a “Great Awakening” that captured the attention of colonial America and helped make the Presbyterian Church the fastest-growing American denomination in the first half of the eighteenth century.¹

Whitefield formed a “perfect match” for many American colonists. As Whitefield’s biographer has argued,

both coveted English praise and legitimacy at the same time they chafed against authority and arbitrary powers; both were at their righteous best when challenging authority in the name of the popular audience; both craved recognition from the very authorities they loved to challenge; and, most important, both leaned toward creative, extra institutional solutions to entrenched problems of liberty and order.²

Questions of liberty and order had in fact been exercising Presbyterians in the colonies since seven clergy of various nationalities organized the first presbytery in America, the Presbytery of Philadelphia, in 1706. Prior to this event, Presbyterians in the colonies were so scattered and disorganized that it was difficult to “untangle the ‘people of Presbyterian persuasion’ from the Congregationalists of New England, the Anglicans of the south, and, especially,

from the rich religious heterogeneity of the middle colonies.” This was because Presbyterian churches were, curiously, “autonomous congregations . . . without a presbytery.”³

As immigrants landed in the New World, they sought, among other things, community in the midst of a frequently lonely and insecure world. Given the role of church and faith in this era, such community was necessarily conceived of in religious and ecclesial terms, and individuals formed congregations to nurture their lives together. “A sense of spiritual and moral kinship, rooted in voluntary adherence to a congregation, was,” historian Timothy Smith claimed, “to remain throughout the eighteenth century and long beyond the key to neighborhood stability, ordered family life, and the education of children.” In time, given the religious diversity of the Middle Colonies and the heritage of Old World ecclesial organization, these congregations, Presbyterians among them, sought communion with each other for discipline and fellowship.⁴

The Presbytery of Philadelphia began to provide such fellowship and discipline, but only gradually and modestly. All available evidence indicates that the founding ministers of the Presbytery of Philadelphia adopted no constitution and did not settle on any common theological agreements. Francis Makemie, an itinerant Presbyterian preacher originally from Ireland and the first moderator of the presbytery, indicated that the primary tasks of the body were to encourage conference about “the most proper measures . . . for advancing religion” and provide for the improvement of ministerial talents. Over time, the presbytery assumed various other responsibilities and came to oversee clerical ordination, installation, and discipline, and the relationship between ministers and their congregations. At this early stage of American Presbyterianism, the chief concern of the clerics forming the presbytery was to enable collegial counsel and modest church order amidst exploding ethnic and religious diversity and threatening natural and political environments.⁵

The political threats of this environment came home to Francis Makemie in a stark way in the winter of 1707 when he was arrested by the governor of New York, Lord Cornbury, for preaching without a license. At first Makemie defended himself based on the English Toleration Act of 1689, but by the time he came to trial in June 1707, the Union of Scotland and England was an accomplished fact, and the English colonies had become provinces of the United Kingdom. Makemie hence changed his defense and argued that since New York had no established church, everyone was “upon an equal level and bottom of liberty.” Makemie was acquitted and widely hailed by non-Anglicans for his spirited and successful defense of religious liberty.⁶

The infant Presbytery of Philadelphia was an intimate clerical fellowship of Scottish and Scots-Irish immigrants and New Englanders, and the

congregations of these clergy were primarily of English ancestry with various concentrations of Scottish, Scots-Irish, Dutch, Huguenots, Welsh, and Germans. By 1716, growth, primarily from the addition of Puritan congregations and increasing Scots-Irish immigration, led the presbytery to reorganize itself into the Synod of Philadelphia with three presbyteries: Long Island, New Castle, and Philadelphia. Presbyterians seemed to be prospering with their informal organizational and theological structure, so reorganization did not compel the presbyters to articulate the powers of the synod or the presbyteries with any more clarity than necessary. Indeed too much definition might well have alienated those of New England stock, who had grown accustomed to the more congregational Consociations of Connecticut as a form of organization.⁷

By the 1720s, however, American Presbyterians, driven by various situations in their growing constituency, could no longer avoid a conversation about their theological and political identity. A series of clerical disciplinary cases, addressing fornication, clerical napping during worship, and sexual harassment, as well as congregational/ministerial tensions in New York, made it apparent to at least some clergy that the synod needed to more clearly articulate its polity, processes, and theology.⁸

These concerns came to a head in 1729, when John Thompson, a minister in the New Castle Presbytery, proposed that the synod adopt the Westminster Confession as its theological and governmental basis and require subscription to the same by all Presbyterian clergy. Thompson, an Irish immigrant, was bewildered and troubled by the fact that the Presbyterian Church, though generally guided by the Westminster Confession, had never adopted any particular theological statement and hence was “a church without a confession.” This, he allowed, was especially a hazard because the church was so young and unestablished and had no school in which to train orthodox ministerial candidates. Moreover, the lack of confessional clarity handicapped the church in efforts of discipline because the church had no bar by which to judge theological offenders.⁹

The Westminster Confession had been written by a combination of (mostly English) divines, lay representatives of Parliament, and Scottish assessors, assembled by Parliament at Westminster Abbey in the 1640s. Members of the Assembly were solidly Reformed in theology, taking their lead from such notable predecessors as John Calvin, Heinrich Bullinger, Theodore Beza, and William Perkins, and leaned toward Presbyterian polity. Though the Confession was “a fair summary of the theological consensus among British Protestants,” emphasizing the sovereignty and covenant faithfulness of God, the authority of Scripture, and the Christian life, the Presbyterian polity embedded in the Confession made it unacceptable to Episcopalians and

Independents, which prevented it from having any significant influence on the future of Protestantism in England. On the other hand, the Confession was adopted by the Church of Scotland in 1647 and the Scottish Parliament in 1649, and the substance of its doctrinal (though not ecclesiastical) judgments was affirmed by New England Puritans in the 1648 Cambridge Platform, assuring its influence in significant arenas of British Protestantism.¹⁰

Thompson's proposal inspired considerable conflict and discussion within the Synod of Philadelphia. A significant number of clergy, led by Jonathan Dickinson, pastor of the church in Elizabethtown, New Jersey, were not excited about the effort to clarify the doctrinal boundaries of the synod. Dickinson, who would become one of the most respected clergymen in the young church, was a third-generation New Englander, born in Hatfield, Massachusetts, in 1688 and educated at the infant Yale College, graduating in 1706. In 1708 he began serving the Elizabethtown church (a congregation composed largely of transplanted New Englanders) and in November 1709 was ordained and installed by the consociated ministers of Fairfield County, Connecticut, a new and somewhat Presbyterianized organization of Congregationalists.¹¹

The similarities of Fairfield "Congregationalism" with Presbyterianism, combined with the need for some order and connection in the face of religious diversity in New Jersey, led the Elizabethtown congregation and many other congregations of Connecticut ancestry to join the Presbytery of Philadelphia in the years after 1706. Those of New England Puritan ancestry, though obviously open to a loose Presbyterian polity, had various motives for looking on confessional subscription with suspicion. Though the Confession was held in high esteem by the ancestors of the Puritans in both old and New England, Anglican subscription requirements had instilled a strong aversion to mandatory confessional subscription among many English dissenters. Additionally, given the longstanding tensions between the Scottish and Scots-Irish and the English, some wondered whether this was a ploy to oust New Englanders from the church or bring the church under the wing of the Synod of Ireland or the General Assembly of Scotland, both of which had traditions of subscription. Finally, as Dickinson articulated, requiring subscription to a confession could compel a violation of conscience and in all likelihood, and in contradiction to Thompson's contentions that he was seeking a "bond of union," lead to schism and confusion.¹²

The differing cultural situations of the New England clergy and the Scottish and Scots-Irish no doubt also contributed to the responses of these various ethnic groups to the proposal for more precise theological definition. Though historian Jon Butler rightly warns of a reductionist reading of colonial Presbyterian debates through the lens of ethnicity, the heritage and

cultural situation of individuals surely affected their perception of the need for stronger theological and political boundaries.¹³ Marilyn Westerkamp recognized the similar situations of Presbyterians in Ireland and in the Middle Colonies, writing:

In Ireland, as in the middle colonies, the Presbyterians were a dissenting minority. In both regions the Presbyterians lacked the official financial support of tithes and were therefore dependent upon voluntary contributions from the membership. Members of both communities were generally excluded from positions of civil power and influence. . . . Finally, since each community existed within a culturally pluralistic society, both had to define their religious systems carefully in order to establish and maintain a cultural identity separate from the surrounding environment.¹⁴

By the 1720s New Englanders of Puritan ancestry, despite various religious struggles, had understood themselves as members of the established church in New England for almost a century. Though officially disestablished in New Jersey, most of these New Englanders still ministered in areas dominated by Reformed churches and likely had a hard time seeing the cultural and religious pluralism of the Middle Colonies as such a threat that it required the church to adopt precise theological and ecclesial boundaries. Indeed a more elastic polity would, Dickinson allowed, enable Calvinists of various stripes to gather in peace. Hence Dickinson, looking wistfully back across the Hudson River, argued, "The Churches of New England have all continued from their first foundation nonsubscribers; and yet they retain their first Faith and Love." Alternately, many of Scots-Irish background, recently arrived in the New World and serving in frontier settlements, would feel almost instinctively the usefulness, indeed necessity, of a more carefully defined church in the midst of a diverse, chaotic, and foreign society, in order to provide for "spiritual growth and moral safety." This tendency would be amplified by tensions between the English and Scottish in New Jersey, tensions which contributed to the amplification "of a common ethnic identity among the Scottish settlers." While such differences would not necessarily determine the response to a proposal for confessional subscription, they would certainly inform the discussion.¹⁵

Faced with such opposing views concerning confessional subscription, the synod sought to compromise. Current and future members of the synod, it declared in the Adopting Act, would be required to assert, either by subscription or verbal assent, "their agreement in, and approbation of" the Westminster Confession and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms "as being in all the essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine." That said, the Act continued, if any minister or candidate

for ministry would “have any scruple with respect to any article or articles of said Confession or Catechisms,” he could declare this scruple and the synod or presbytery could determine whether such scruple entailed an “essential and necessary article of faith” and hence whether the minister or candidate could be accepted into the communion. Shortly thereafter the synod recommended the Westminster Directory for worship, discipline, and government as a guide for its members.¹⁶

While the Act, likely composed by Dickinson and modeled, in large part, on the short-lived Irish Pacific Articles of 1720, did provide a means for the divided parties to agree, it was, as Jon Butler has noted, “riddled with so many qualifications that it gave the appearance more of veneer than of substance” and “signaled a victory for no one.” Moreover, the 1730s give little evidence that it contributed to the peace and unity of the church. Indeed as the synod struggled to keep pace with the needs of the increasing numbers of Scots-Irish immigrants who were arriving on America’s shores in the 1730s, “the denominational heterogeneity of the Middle Colonies” led to religious confusion and indifference.¹⁷

Given the stark religious pluralism in the culture, it is little surprise that many Presbyterian clergy, especially those predisposed to confessional subscription, saw subscription as an antidote to religious confusion and decline. As a result, in 1730 the Presbytery of New Castle overtured the synod to require “unqualified subscription,” as did Donegal Presbytery in 1732. Indeed, the synod spent the better part of the next decade fighting over and trying to clarify what the Adopting Act meant. Finally, in 1736 the synod, with the tacit agreement of Dickinson, unanimously passed a resolution claiming that they adhered to the Westminster Confession “without the least variation or alteration” and that this was “the meaning and true intent” in 1729.¹⁸

When the synod adopted the Westminster Confession as the confession of the church in 1729, they also declared their understanding of the relationship of church and state in the New World. In response to Chapters 20 and 23 of the Westminster Confession, which addressed these issues, the synod “unanimously declared that they do not receive those articles in any such sense as to suppose the civil magistrate hath a controlling power over Synods with respect to the exercise of their ministerial authority; or power to persecute any for their religion, or in any sense contrary to the Protestant succession to the throne of Great Britain.” That is, following the lead of Francis Makemie in 1707, they argued for religious toleration and insisted that the magistrate had no authority over ecclesiastical matters. If historian James Hasting Nichols perhaps overstated the case in claiming that this was an affirmation of “religious liberty,” colonial Presbyterians certainly here affirmed the import of religious diversity and ecclesiastical autonomy.¹⁹

The issues inherent in such tolerance and diversity became starkly apparent to Presbyterians in Newark in 1733. In that year, Colonel Josiah Ogden, a respected resident of Newark and member of the Presbyterian Church, took advantage of a sunny Sabbath to gather wheat in his fields after many days of rain. Members of the church censured Ogden for this blatant disregard of the Fourth Commandment but, in contrast to New Englanders, had no civil recourse for dealing with this breach. Though the presbytery tried to soften the blow to community by overturning the censure, the damage had been done. Ogden, in the face of such strict Sabbatarianism, renounced the jurisdiction of the Presbyterian church and joined with a number of other Anglicans in the community to found an Anglican church.²⁰

If those who desired strict uniformity of doctrine and practice thought that general agreement on the Adopting Act would finally provide some peace and cohesion to the infant denomination and its members, they were sorely mistaken. As Presbyterians were struggling with how best to define their place in the strange new cultural and religious world of the Middle Colonies, the cultural and religious tectonic plates of the colonies were shifting, and shifting violently.²¹ Whitefield's visit to Philadelphia left no doubt that something new was underway.

AWAKENINGS SMALL AND GREAT

The struggles in the Presbyterian Church to negotiate between the twin desiderata of order and freedom were complicated—and were indeed transformed—by the advent of the Great Awakening, a series of revivals that reordered churches and society in the midst of a region that was already in great flux. “More than a religious movement,” Gary Nash has contended, “the Awakening must be seen as a profound cultural crisis involving the convergence of political, social, economic, and ideological forces.” The clerical proponents of the Awakening were concerned not simply to revive the faith “for the sake of the church,” but also sought to “check the worldliness promoted by the era’s new forms of commerce and entertainment.” The power to pursue these goals was dependent, at least in part, on the ability of the clergy to speak with one voice, a voice that, in the course of the 1730s, became increasingly dissonant.²²

These revivals, part of a transatlantic revival tradition that began as early as the 1620s in Ireland, sought to advance the kingdom of God through charismatic preaching that led to heartfelt conviction of sin and conversion to Christ. Revivalism “was part of the Scots-Irish religiosity, a tradition that flourished under the encouragement afforded by colonial ministers.” Key in the advent of revivalism and its impact on Presbyterians in America were

William and Gilbert Tennent, two members of the “most important family of evangelical clergymen in the Middle Colonies.” William Tennent, born in Ireland and educated at Edinburgh, had arrived in America in 1718 and been accepted into membership in the Synod of Philadelphia. After a couple pastorates in New York, he settled in Neshaminy, Pennsylvania, in 1726 and founded an academy for training ministers, modeled on such schools in Ireland. Scorned by its detractors as the “Log College,” Tennent’s school had a curriculum that tended to follow a Scottish model, with an emphasis on the Westminster Confession, the necessity of conversion, and the practice of piety in the Christian life. About a score of students would eventually study under Tennent, eighteen of whom became Presbyterian revivalists.²³

Gilbert, William’s eldest son, became the leading revivalist voice among Presbyterians in the Great Awakening. Born in Ireland in 1703 and educated by his father, Gilbert received a master’s degree from Yale in 1725 and was ordained in 1726 to serve the Presbyterians in New Brunswick, New Jersey. There he came under the influence of Theodore Frelinghuysen, a Dutch Reformed pietist serving in Raritan, New Jersey, who proclaimed the necessity of conversion and holy living and had a reputation for censoriousness and rash judgment of the spiritual state of others. His sermons “were emotionally charged and punctuated by vivid contrasts between the darkness of sin and the light of God’s grace.” Tennent found Frelinghuysen’s conversionist piety congenial with the faith he had learned from his father and adopted these emphases as his own. Indeed, Tennent joined Frelinghuysen as something of an associate and led worship with Frelinghuysen in Dutch churches as they itinerated along the Raritan River valley.²⁴

By 1728 Tennent’s preaching was inspiring “spiritual awakenings” rooted in congregations that had a distinctly Scottish flavor. These were mirrored by awakenings in the surrounding areas led by his brothers and other Log College graduates. The Scottish revival tradition generally emphasized that genuine conversions took months to negotiate, with careful instruction in doctrine, under the close watch of a skilled preacher. Gilbert’s brother, William Jr., had undergone just such a conversion, and the Log College graduates sought to lead others down a similar path.²⁵

In 1734 Gilbert Tennent successfully proposed two overtures to the synod that encouraged all ministers to attend to the “holy exemplary conversions” and holy living of their parishioners and instructed all presbyteries to examine all ministerial candidates regarding their “experiences of a work of sanctifying grace.” Though Tennent saw heresy and clerical ignorance as threats to the church, the primary danger to religion, as he would express with stark force in 1740, was found in a ministry that lacked a heartfelt personal knowledge of God’s grace and was therefore unable to kindle conversions in others.²⁶

Tennent's concern for clerical standards was mirrored by many of his colleagues who had a concurrent concern for respectable clerical education. The absence of a college in the Middle Colonies, coupled with the cost of traveling to New England or Europe for education, prevented many candidates from pursuing a university degree. Rather, they sought training at academies like Tennent's Log College or from pastors; this led to worries among many clergy about the adequacy of preparation for candidates. For these presbyters, the danger of heresy from without mandated a ministry that was classically trained; in 1738 the synod passed legislation requiring all candidates for ordination who did not hold a college degree to be examined by a committee of the synod (not just a presbytery).²⁷

At one level, since salvation depended on the Word of God rightly preached, and since faithful preaching was grounded in solid learning, a standard for education seemed a natural concern. As historian Leonard Larabee summarized, "To insist . . . upon a learned ministry trained to the use of reason, was not merely to 'unionize' the pulpit for the benefit of its current incumbents, but even more to protect the church from the fatal consequences of ministerial ignorance." Not a little of this concern probably arose from status anxiety from those who found themselves in the new, disestablished colonial situation; but much, no doubt, came from a concern over the ecclesial tendencies of William and Gilbert Tennent and others graduates of Tennent's Log College. The stipulation requiring synodical examination of all ministers not holding degrees was, of course, taken as a slap in the face, not only of William Tennent, but of all of those who had been trained in the Log College or similar institutions. In their defense Samuel Finley, who would become president of The College of New Jersey (Princeton) mocked those who "say, that most of us are unlearned," asserting that Christ chose "Twelve unlearned, unpolished Men, most of them Fishers; and gave them a Commission to preach the Gospel, without consulting the *Sanhedrim* about such *unprecedented Proceedings*."²⁸

The tensions around this new ordination requirement reflected concerns that had been growing among some about the practices of the revivalists. In 1737, for example, Gilbert Tennent roused the ire of the Philadelphia Presbytery by crossing presbytery boundaries to preach at the Maidenhead (New Jersey) Church. The presbytery complained about this intrusion, but Tennent, who viewed itinerancy as a means to address the severe clergy shortage and spread the gospel, was unimpressed with his colleagues' seemingly overwhelming need for order, and showed his scorn by returning to Maidenhead to preach and administer communion only a few months later. In response, the synod in 1738 passed a regulation that restricted a clergyman's freedom to preach outside of his presbytery. Nonetheless, itinerancy, viewed by many as

a threat to religious and social order, would continue to exercise the fledgling denomination and eventually contribute significantly to schism.²⁹

The synod's concern for institutional order can be understood, given the centrifugal forces released by the revivals. Some parishioners of William Tennent's congregation in Neshaminy, for example, tried to fire him in 1736, but eventually settled for the hiring of an assistant pastor. Additionally, the Hopewell and Maidenhead congregations, inspired by conflicts surrounding Gilbert Tennent and other revivalist preachers, ultimately divided. At the same time that the revivals were having this centrifugal influence, they also exerted a centripetal force on colonial Presbyterians. Ned Landsman has argued that these revivals, at least at the start, "represented not only the transfer of a Scottish religious style to the New World," but also served to help unify the Presbyterian identity of Scottish settlers. In the years before Whitefield's colonial tours, therefore, Scots came to dominate those congregations where revivalists had been promoting rebirth.³⁰

These tensions threatened to boil over in 1739 when the newly formed New Brunswick Presbytery, composed entirely of ministers sympathetic to revivalism, declared that they were not bound by the synod's recent act requiring synodical examination of those not holding university degrees and licensed John Rowland, a recent graduate of the Log College. At the 1739 Synod, Gilbert Tennent and others unsuccessfully objected to the itinerancy and examination acts, Rowland's licensure was revoked, and the New Brunswick Presbytery was admonished for its improper actions. With this, Tennent and his followers walked out.³¹

Having been rebuffed by the synod, members of the New Brunswick Presbytery took matters into their own hands, and relations with the synod unraveled. The now-unlicensed John Rowland preached at Maidenhead and Hopewell congregations and, upon William Tennent's invitation, at Neshaminy. When this irregularity was brought before the Philadelphia Presbytery, the elder Tennent dismissed the presbytery's authority and "contemptuously withdrew." Other revivalists joined Rowland in itinerating in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, and Rowland and James McCrea were ordained by the New Brunswick Presbytery.³² Finally, when John Pierson, who was of New England stock and pastor of the Woodbridge Church, was condemned for his lack of zealotry for the revival, Jonathan Dickinson stepped to the plate.

Dickinson desired "a renewed social and religious order" and was alarmed by the growing censoriousness of the revivalist party in the church. In October 1739, while not criticizing the revival per se, he defended his colleague John Pierson and took issue with the judgmental spirit and intrusiveness of the revival. Dickinson condemned "the Injustice . . . the Injury and Indignity

done to those Ministers of Christ, who are the Objects of Contempt and Abuse,” and insisted that no one can know “what have been the religious Experiences of others.” In such attacks Dickinson saw the possibility of religious and societal disintegration. He sought, instead, to promote both “vital religion” and order in church and society.³³

This was the tense state of affairs when Whitefield arrived in Philadelphia in November 1739 to awaken the colonies. Given Whitefield’s and Tennent’s similar concerns for promoting new birth, the two quickly became friends. Gilbert Tennent, as he had accompanied Frelinghuysen, now accompanied Whitefield as he traveled north through New Jersey and New York; in so doing, he sought to mend fences with the likes of Dickinson, who remained concerned about the unsettling effects of the revivals on church and society. Whitefield’s ministry and influence would transform the Presbyterian Awakening from a largely Scottish event, indeed something of a “nativistic revival,” into a broader, “greater” intercolonial awakening.³⁴

The divisions encouraged by the Awakening were starkly apparent in Elizabethtown on November 19, when Whitefield preached in Dickinson’s church after having been denied entrance into the town’s Anglican pulpit. Whitefield, as ever, mesmerized the crowds, promoting new birth and condemning clerical opponents of the revival. Though Whitefield’s efforts, given the work of Frelinghuysen and the Tennents, were “as much reinforcing as pioneering,” his revival tour galvanized the revival movement and mightily advanced its social consequences. A recent biographer summarized the consequences of the Awakening, claiming that Whitefield “spoke in the name of no denomination and enjoyed no state support. His movement . . . depended solely on the voluntary goodwill of the people. . . . By the sheer location and circumstances of his ministry, Whitefield challenged . . . time-honored axioms of social order and hierarchy.”³⁵

Whitefield’s appeal and success emboldened Gilbert Tennent to pursue his revivalistic agenda with increased fervor, and on March 8, 1740, while “intruding” in Nottingham, Pennsylvania, he unleashed the most famous sermon of his career, “The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry.”³⁶ Against those Presbyterian ministers who had opposed the revival by limiting itinerancy and requiring synodical examinations, Tennent let fly a barrage of criticism:

Is a blind Man fit to be a Guide in a very dangerous Way? Is a dead Man fit to bring others to Life? a mad man fit to give Counsel in a Matter of Life and Death? . . . a Captive bound in the Massy Chains of Darkness and Guilt, a proper Person to set others at Liberty? . . . Is’nt an unconverted Minister like a Man who would learn others to swim, before he has learn’d it himself, and so is drowned in the Act, and dies like a Fool?³⁷

Those who found themselves under the ministry of such men, Tennent declared, should “go from them to hear Godly Persons.” Deference to one’s traditionally understood social superiors was of no consequence. “He may lawfully go,” Tennent concluded, “and that frequently, where he gets the most Good to his precious Soul.” After all, “the Promises of blessing the Word,” are not bound “to those only who keep within their Parish-line.”³⁸

The tensions among Presbyterians had obviously been growing for many years, but this open and forthright criticism of clerical colleagues and the blatant encouragement of laity to abandon the deference due to pastors and vote with their feet, to seek out pastors they preferred, to cross the boundaries of parish and respect to the ministry, raised the stakes and the heat. Tennent’s itinerancy, and his encouragement that laity also itinerate, reflected larger movements, especially market-driven consumerism, transforming the colonies.³⁹ Historian Timothy Hall summarized the radical implications of itinerating preachers, claiming that

itinerants’ mobility, their disregard of local boundaries or authority, their emotional appeals to the hearts of voluntary listeners, their eagerness to adapt products of the market to spread the gospel—all ran afoul of a well-defined set of expectations concerning the role of minister, church, and laity in community life—indeed, concerning the nature of community itself.⁴⁰

This threat of social disorder contributed to the fear of many of Tennent’s opponents in the church. But the current was running against the antirevivalists. Before Tennent’s words faded, Whitefield returned to the Middle Colonies to adoring throngs, and when Presbyterian clergyman Francis Alison stepped into the fray to publicly challenge Whitefield’s theology, he was drowned out by the shouts of Whitefield’s admirers. As Whitefield departed for points south, Tennent and his allies, with Whitefield’s public blessing, maintained the enthusiasm around the “new birth.”⁴¹

Tennent, in “The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry,” not only criticized “stone-blind” and “stone-dead” ministers and encouraged itinerancy, but also suggested the means by which to provide for a faithful ministry. Given the fact that “the publick Academies [Harvard and Yale]” were corrupted, Tennent declared, the faithful should “encourage private Schools, or Seminaries of Learning, which are under the Care of skilful and experienced Christians; in which those only should be admitted, who upon strict Examination, have in the Judgment of a reasonable *Charity*, the plain Evidences of experimental Religion.”⁴² In short, the faithful should support schools like William Tennent’s Log College.

When the Presbyterian Synod convened in Philadelphia in May 1740, the revival was still in full swing. Tennent and his allies, to the delight of the crowds and the consternation of those who decried revivalism and itinerancy, kept up a barrage of preaching at Society Hall. Given such strong popular support, the time was ripe, Tennent thought, to push for the rescission of the restrictions regarding itinerancy and education. The synod did repeal the restrictions on itinerancy, which had proven unenforceable, but on the issue of examinations various strategies at compromise proved fruitless. When Tennent and Samuel Blair then charged that a number of the assembled clergy were in a “carnal state,” “ignorant of divine things,” and could muster only “dull,” “lifeless,” and “powerless” preaching, any predilection to compromise evaporated, and the synod adjourned.⁴³

In the fall of 1740, Whitefield, fresh from a revival swing through New England, stopped to see Tennent, whom he praised as a “son of thunder,” to encourage him to follow up in New England to keep the revival fires burning. Tennent, having just completed a two-month tour of New Jersey and Maryland, thus took the unprecedented step, as a settled minister, of leaving for another three months to preach to the Congregationalists of New England. Though his itinerancy was condemned as a “bare-faced Affront to the generality of the Ministry,” Tennent was also praised by an auditor as “the best preacher, that I had ever seen or heard.” Ezra Stiles at Yale summarized the view of many opponents of Whitefield, claiming that it appeared that “multitudes were seriously, soberly, and solemnly out of their wits.”⁴⁴ Congregationalists and Presbyterians had long understood themselves as cousins, indeed siblings, but the growing friendly relations between Presbyterian and Congregationalist supporters of the revival, in conjunction with the growing stresses within the Presbyterian fold surrounding the revival, betrayed the shifting theological tectonics brought on by the Awakening.

To no one’s great surprise, therefore, while Tennent sojourned in the land of the Puritans, things at home reached a boiling point. Against raucous opposition from many laity, the Presbytery of Donegal tried two revivalist clergy for intruding in others’ parishes and followed this by banning Presbyterian laity from attending services led by itinerant preachers, upon pain of excommunication. Clearly, those opposed to the strategies and claims of Tennent and his supporters had reached their limit and had decided to use every means at their disposal to try to halt the movement. In the words of historian Elizabeth Ingersoll, “they could no longer watch their supposed fellow ministers in Christ spreading theological error, flaunting ministerial requirements, splitting congregations, shouting abuses against faithful ministers, imposing new terms of communion and disclaiming all presbyterial and synodical authority.”⁴⁵

Given the tension between these two parties, and the criticisms that they leveled at each other, it is important to note that, despite differing attitudes and emphases, “the controversy was not, at its heart, a matter of conflicting theologies.” Though those for and against the revival differed on whether regeneration necessarily resulted in human virtue, both insisted on justification by faith and accepted predestination. Likewise, they agreed that “regeneration proceeded in stages,” though they differed on how strictly this proceeded according to a set form. While at the height of the conflict there was a real disagreement between revivalists like Gilbert Tennent and anti-revivalists like John Thompson on the possibility and centrality of the immediate witness of assurance by God’s Spirit, over time Tennent came to emphasize the role of a sanctified life in giving assurance of salvation. The division was “between those who felt that the Westminster Confession could be maintained alongside an emphasis on revival” and “those who maintained the conservative belief that Presbyterian confessionalism was damaged by revival.”⁴⁶ Despite doctrinal similarities, however, in the midst of the conflict, differences were magnified and similarities faded.

The different interpretations of the value of the revival seem to have been influenced by a variety of factors. The revivals tended to find the greatest Presbyterian response “in and around the larger towns and in areas with close connections to those commercial centers.” Hence the Scottish and Scots-Irish in older towns along the major New York to Philadelphia corridor were significant participants, but the more newly settled frontier area of the Susquehanna Valley was largely quiet. In the wake of Whitefield’s visit, the revival seemed to have had much more appeal to men (in contrast to the earlier appeal of the revival primarily to women) and to those engaged in commerce, as opposed to farming. Indeed, revivalists Gilbert and William Tennent Jr. and Samuel Finley all married into mercantile families, and many revivalists’ sons entered business life.⁴⁷

The revivalists sought to address the rising acquisitiveness that powered the growing commercialism in the colonies, contrasting the “fulness of Christ . . . with the emptiness of all the world could offer.” As markets expanded and wealth increased, clergy began to worry about its effect on community and moral virtue. Though the rich had not cornered the market on avarice, Gilbert Tennent insisted that men “grow in Wickedness in Proportion to the Increase of their Wealth.” The Awakening attracted individuals from across the spectrum of wealth, but such warnings addressed those most strongly who were seeking to negotiate the demands of the faith and the increasing acquisitiveness and commerce of the era. Thus, by the mid-eighteenth century “Scotsmen who inhabited the central Jersey corridor had overwhelmingly attached themselves to evangelical Presbyterian churches, in part as a

response to the problem of coming to terms with an increasingly commercialized and heterogeneous society.”⁴⁸

Generational differences also seem to have contributed to the strains of the denomination. Those who tended to support the revival were significantly younger (by about a decade) than their anti-revivalist counterparts and had been born in the New World or spent their formative adolescent years in the New World. As Patricia Bonomi suggests, those who were younger and for whom the New World was home had different career expectations and “were not so likely to be imbued with an Old World sense of prerogative and order.”⁴⁹ Their tendency to challenge Old World deference and their openness to new methods sat well with many laity, who also saw freedom from Old World restrictions as more liberating than threatening.

The mood, when the synod convened in May 1741, was, therefore, strained and divided. The supporters of the revival were convinced that they were engaged in a momentous work of God and were being frustrated by those who sought to confine the Holy Spirit in rules and discipline. Those who opposed the revival saw censoriousness, unorthodox theology, and disorder running rampant. Some, like Dickinson, had tried to steer a middle path, but, foreseeing heated disagreement, opted not to attend the synod. Tennent and his supporters sought to push again for the rescission of the examination act so that graduates of the Log College could legitimately be ordained. Before such a motion reached the floor, however, some conservatives, stealing a page from Irish church history, protested the alleged deviations of the revivalists from the standards and rules of the church; they demanded that the revival party affirm their adherence to the Westminster Confession and Directory or be removed as members. Exactly what happened in the wake of this protest is not clear from the records, but when the dust settled, the synod, barely twenty-five years old, was divided into an Old Side conservative party and a New Side revivalist party.⁵⁰

OLD SIDE/NEW SIDE

In the wake of this division, members of the Old Side and the New Side were left to pick up the pieces. The New Side ministers formed themselves into the “Conjunct Presbyteries of New Brunswick and Londonderry” and spent the following years defending their adherence to the Westminster Confession and Directory, fending off internal dissent, disciplining members for scandalous behavior, and disassociating themselves from the enthusiasm and censoriousness of radical revivalists like James Davenport. Tennent, in a letter to Dickinson that would later be published, confessed his mishandling of ecclesiastical

affairs, his hot temper, and his sorrow at the turn of events. Meanwhile, Jonathan Dickinson worked behind the scenes, including meeting with the renowned Congregationalist Jonathan Edwards, to address the rupture.⁵¹

Dickinson, due in large part to his New England Puritan heritage, was predisposed to support the revivals. Though concerned about the divisive potential and results of the Awakening, he supported the revival as a means of renewing the church and society. In *The Danger of Schisms*, published in 1739, Dickinson warned about the fissiparous tendencies in revivalism, but in *Witness of the Spirit* (1740), *The True Scripture-Doctrine* (1741), and *A Display of God's Special Grace* (1742) he laid out his more constructive thoughts concerning the Awakening. In *Witness of the Spirit*, "the Awakening's first sustained analysis of the psychology of conversion," Dickinson publicly declared his sympathy with at least certain aspects of the revival. In it he declared that God's Spirit convicts individuals of their sin, witnesses to their adoption in Christ, inspires in them a love of God and a love of God's children, and is distinguished by its influence on a believer in "*renewing* his Nature, *enlightening* his Mind, and *sanctifying* his Heart." That said, he categorically denied the claim of those revivalists who insisted that assurance of conversion is a necessary component of saving faith. He amplified his thoughts on the workings of God's Spirit in *True Scripture-Doctrine*, where he argued that the Spirit gives a believer "a realizing View of the great Truths revealed in the Word of God, . . . enabling him to see Things as they are." Against those who would argue that in the revivals affections overwhelmed the intellect, Dickinson allowed that in conversion, God changes a sinner by "spiritual *Illumination*, by impressing a *right View* of Things upon his Mind, or by enabling him to act *reasonably*." Finally, in *A Display of God's Special Grace* (published at first anonymously), Dickinson declared, against the revival's opponents, that the Awakening was in fact God's work and, against the antinomian tendencies of the extreme revivalists, that sanctification is in fact evidence of justification.⁵²

By 1742 the revivals in the Middle Colonies were subsiding, and Dickinson hoped that perhaps the division of the previous year could be repaired. The Synod of Philadelphia that year elected Dickinson as moderator and engaged in negotiations with the New Side clergy but to no avail. When these attempts failed, the members of the New York Presbytery offered a statement affirming the positive aspects of the revival but protesting both the censoriousness of the New Brunswick clergy and the manner of their exclusion from the synod. With this Dickinson began to succeed Gilbert Tennent as the (more moderate) public leader of the New Side party.⁵³

In 1743 Dickinson and the New York Presbytery again sought reconciliation of the Synod of Philadelphia and the Conjoint Presbyteries and again failed. While issues specific to the synod remained contested, radical revivalists

in the intervening year in New England had done nothing to calm the fears of the Old Side. In New London, Connecticut, in March, James Davenport presided over a book burning—of the works of such respected New England divines as Increase Mather, Benjamin Coleman, Charles Chauncy, and Eliphalet Adams—as the crowd sang “Hallelujahs and Gloria Patri.” If that were not enough, the following day Davenport insisted that “wigs, cloaks and breeches, Hoods, Gowns, Rings, Jewels and Necklaces,” symbols of worldly pride, be tossed into the flames as well.⁵⁴ Suffice it to say that such activity, even when repudiated by the Presbyterian revivalists, provided a backdrop that inspired an aversion to compromise.

The New York Presbytery, certain that the members of the Conjoint Presbyteries had been wronged, joined with them in 1745 to found the Synod of New York, and elected Jonathan Dickinson as the first moderator. Ministers were to subscribe to the Westminster Confession under the terms of the Adopting Act of 1729, have a “competent degree” of knowledge for ministry, and be “orthodox in their doctrine, regular in their lives, and diligent in their endeavors to promote the important designs of vital godliness.” In a nod to the Log College graduates, no college degree would be required for ordination, but William Tennent’s advancing years had led to the school’s recent closure nonetheless.⁵⁵

Though the formation of this New Side Synod found coherence in its support of the revival, on another score, the alliance of the New Brunswick party and Dickinson was strained.⁵⁶ Tennent and his party were adamant in their rejection of the synod’s authority to examine candidates, seeking those powers for the presbytery alone, so they could promote pro-revival ministers. Dickinson, on the other hand, had always been much less concerned about synodical authority and much more concerned about issues of confessional subscription and church unity. This concern for unity explains Dickinson’s insistence on exploring all possible avenues for reconciliation before joining with the New Side ministers in forming a new synod. To his dismay, conflict over the revivals had left the infant denomination irreconcilably divided, and he found himself presiding over a new denomination.

CONTESTED EDUCATION: LEADERSHIP FOR THE NEW WORLD

The deep concern of Reformed Christians for education in service of God and neighbor continued to swirl around the now-divided denomination and resulted in various plans to nurture leadership for church and society in the colonies. Indeed, the Great Awakening not only led to schism among

Presbyterians, but also brought a “curious unity of purpose to the Old and New Sides” in that “both the revival’s proponents and its enemies were forced to answer the same questions about the nature of true religious experience, and both sides came to regard the pursuit of enlightened learning as part of this larger enquiry.”⁵⁷ As a result, in the mid-eighteenth century, Presbyterians played a major role in the development of three institutions: The Academy of Philadelphia (University of Pennsylvania), The College of New Jersey (Princeton University), and King’s College (Columbia University).

At the time of the Old Side/New Side schism, the Old Side, while insisting that clergy hold a college degree, lacked any college under their control and therefore found themselves dependent on the British universities or the New England schools for new clergy. In an effort to address their predicament and still maintain their educational standards, they sought to arrange for Yale, now opposed to the Awakening, to accept students prepared by Francis Alison at New London Academy, in Pennsylvania. Alison was a native of Ireland who had been educated at Edinburgh, came to Pennsylvania in 1735, and was ordained to the New London Presbyterian Church in 1737. A disciple of the Scottish Enlightenment and “the most outstanding of the Old Side ministers,” Alison sought to use his influence as a pastor and classical scholar to help build an “ideal society.”⁵⁸

The educational plan never came to fruition, however, and the New London Academy was soon buried in debt, leading Alison to accept a call to the Academy of Philadelphia in 1752. He was quickly made vice-provost, under Anglican William Smith, and the school, chartered as a college in 1755, became a center of interest for the Old Side. Though Smith tried to steer the school toward Anglicanism, many of Alison’s students remained at the college as faculty, giving the “non-denominational” school a distinctly Presbyterian flavor.⁵⁹

Education, Alison insisted, had profound social consequences for the developing colonies. “Farmers’ sons must furnish ministers & magistrates for all our frontier inhabitants,” Alison contended, “or they must sink into Ignorance, licentiousness, & all their hurtful consequences.” Alison, in pursuit of an education that could build up a moral society, introduced the thought of Scottish moral philosopher and Presbyterian minister Francis Hutcheson to his students and America. Hutcheson had argued that “the true foundation of morality was to be found in benevolent affections guided by the moral sense” and was concerned to provide guidance for practical issues of life. Additionally, Hutcheson stressed the import of balanced government and the right of resistance to tyranny, ideas that would, through the efforts of Alison and other Presbyterian educators, significantly influence revolutionary and post-revolutionary America. For Alison, faithfulness, liberty, and education went

hand in hand. “The kingdom of Christ, or the cause of Liberty, virtue, or Learning” he wrote, were all the same. Despite the best efforts of Alison, however, the Old Side was never terribly successful in nurturing Old Side ministers at the College of Philadelphia. A few miles up the road, however, the College of New Jersey was sending dozens of clergy into New Side congregations, that would, by dint of sheer numbers, eventually overwhelm the Old Side and motivate efforts at ecclesial reunion.⁶⁰

Despite the disagreement between New and Old Side clergy over the need for clergy to hold a college degree, New Side ministers did not abandon the historic Reformed emphasis on education in service of God and neighbor. The New Side concern for such education took institutional shape in the College of New Jersey to train “pious & well qualified Candidates for the Ministry” and “produce men of letters, lawyers, and politicians who would mold society in accordance with the dictates of evangelical religion.”⁶¹

The College of New Jersey was founded in 1746 by six alumni of Yale and one of Harvard. The clergy in the group, Jonathan Dickinson, Ebenezer Pemberton, John Pierson, and Aaron Burr, were joined in this undertaking by three laymen, William Smith, Peter Van Brugh Livingston, and William Peartree Smith, all of New York City. Such a school, the founders indicated, would, in addition to providing leaders for church and state, address the “rudeness, incivility, and ignorance” that dominated the landscape. The original seven trustees quickly added allies from the Log College faction and elected Gilbert and William Tennent, Samuel Blair, Richard Treat, and Samuel Finley to the board before naming Dickinson as president.⁶²

Not more than five months after the school opened in Elizabethtown, New Jersey, in May 1747, however, Dickinson died, and Aaron Burr, pastor of the Newark Church, was elected to succeed him. Jonathan Belcher, a revivalist Congregationalist, was named governor of New Jersey in 1747 and, in order to safeguard the infant school, granted a new charter that broadened the board membership while still preserving a New Side clerical majority. In 1753, as Gilbert Tennent and Samuel Davies were busy collecting donations for the young school in Great Britain, the trustees decided to move the college to the safer, bucolic confines of Princeton, New Jersey, midway between New York and Philadelphia, in the demographic center of New Side Presbyterianism. In 1756 the college community, now some seventy students strong, made the move to the newly built Nassau Hall in Princeton. Burr’s health was failing, however, and in September 1757 he died. In what must have seemed like a curse to the supporters of the college, Princeton would go through three more presidents in the next nine years. The trustees elected Burr’s father-in-law, Jonathan Edwards, to succeed him, but Edwards had barely set foot in New Jersey when he died of a smallpox inoculation. He

was succeeded by Samuel Davies, who, having suffered from tuberculosis for years, died in 1761, and then by Samuel Finley, who passed away in 1766.⁶³

This succession of presidents, though leaving the college in a state of almost perpetual turmoil, betrays the theological and cultural presuppositions of the founders of the institution. All were able and articulate defenders of the moderate Awakening, indeed the most able and thoughtful theologians on the continent, drawn from across the colonies (Dickinson from the Middle Colonies, Edwards from New England, and Davies from Virginia), and all sought not simply the revival of religion but the reformation of the society. The school was “designed to inculcate piety and virtue together in a generation of provincial community leaders.”⁶⁴ The thought of two of these leaders, Edwards and Davies, provides some sense of the mission of Princeton.

Edwards, the most articulate defender of the moderate Awakening, had been a Congregationalist pastor at Northampton, Massachusetts, for decades, before being fired and receiving a call to the Indian Mission in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Though he hesitated to take the position at the College of New Jersey, his growing ties with New Side Presbyterians no doubt encouraged a positive response. Edwards saw in the revivals signs that the millennium was beginning to draw near. Christian faith necessarily compelled individuals, Edwards held, to “serve people in society and give to the poor.” “A man of right spirit,” he contended, “is not a man of a narrow, private spirit; but he is greatly concerned for the good of the public community to which he belongs, and particularly of the town where he dwells. . . . A Christian spirited man will also be concerned for the good of his country, and it disposes him to lay out himself for it.” Religion, Edwards insisted, was necessary not simply for morality, but for a healthy society and the blessings of God.⁶⁵

Edwards addressed the question of morality most directly in *The Nature of True Virtue*, written in the 1750s but not published until 1765, seven years after his death. In his contribution to a transatlantic philosophical conversation, Edwards argued that “true virtue most essentially consists in benevolence to Being in general. Or perhaps to speak more accurately, it is that consent, propensity and union of heart to Being in general, that is immediately exercised in a general good will.” Love for God thus necessarily resulted in love for others. As George Marsden summarizes, “Edwards was insisting that the only important question in life is whether one is united to God or in rebellion against God. If united with God (which for Edwards was always an ongoing process), then one will learn to love all that God loves—which includes benevolence and justice toward others.”⁶⁶ The nurture of this disinterested benevolence was at the center of Princeton’s mission in these years.

Samuel Davies, Edward’s successor, was twenty years Edwards’s junior and had spent the bulk of his ministry in Virginia after being ordained as

an evangelist by the New Side church in 1747. Like Edwards, his preaching focused on the necessity of conversion and insisted that true faith would result in “living a life of virtue and holiness.” A powerful defender of religious toleration in Virginia, he had cut his teeth not on the battles between Old and New Side Presbyterians, but in seeking a way for faithful living as a dissenter in a colony with an established Anglican church. His stature among New Side leaders was cemented by his success at gathering funds for the infant college during his visit to Great Britain from 1753 to 1755.⁶⁷

Upon his return from this trip, Davies took the lead in encouraging a strident response to the incursions of French and Indians into Virginia that had started the previous summer. The war, he insisted, should inspire both repentance for sins that had brought forth this punishment and a vigorous defense: “I have no scruple thus openly to declare that such of you whose circumstances allow of it, may not only lawfully enlist and take up arms, but that your so doing is a Christian duty, and acting an honourable part, worthy of a man, a freeman, a Briton, and a Christian.” Davies’s stature as a renowned preacher, defender of religious toleration in Virginia, successful fund-raiser, and citizen made him a natural choice for the position of president upon Edwards’s untimely demise. Though Davies hesitated to assume this mantle, eventually his sense of call to God and society prevailed. “My life, Sir,” he wrote, “I should look upon as secured to God and the Public: and the Service of God and Mankind is not a *local* Thing in my View.”⁶⁸

Davies exemplified that strain in American Presbyterianism that sought to integrate recent scientific findings with the truths of Scripture in pursuit of a unified, Christian worldview. Upon the report of the great Lisbon earthquake in 1755, he suggested that though God certainly could overrule the laws of nature to produce earthquakes, God could also use natural causes (as suggested by modern science) to fulfill his will. As such, Davies proclaimed, “thus, by a preconcerted plan, he answers all the *occasional* exigencies of the world, and suits himself to particular cases, without a miracle, or controlling the laws of nature.” Even so, the primary lesson to be learned from the earthquake was to turn to God so one “shall rest for ever in a country that shall never be shaken with earthquakes, nor be subject to any of the calamities of this mortal state.” Science might suggest new ways that God interacts with creation, but this would not dull the need for evangelism or the power of the gospel.⁶⁹

Presbyterians were convinced that education was not only critical for clergy, but also held a key, if not the key, to the future of the colonies. Davies encouraged the graduates of 1760: “Serve your Generation. Live not for yourselves, but the Publick. Be the Servants of the Church; the Servants of your Country; the Servants of all.” Given the import of education to church and state, Presbyterians engaged not only in staffing and building colleges but

also in significant battles over a potential rival on the educational landscape, King's College in New York.⁷⁰

The founding of Princeton by the Presbyterians in 1746 infuriated their colonial Anglican competitors and, led by Samuel Johnson, pastor of the Stratford, Connecticut, Anglican Church, spurred them to pursue an Anglican college to "mold the outlooks of future political and professional elites" and "assure social peace and unity." Johnson and his allies viewed Jonathan Dickinson and Aaron Burr as "the most bitter Enemies of the Church," and looked on them and the recent Awakening as "menaces to social order, true religion, and the church as an institution." The College of New Jersey, Johnson complained in 1747, "will be a fountain of Nonsense."⁷¹

Given such animosity and the perceived threat of Anglican domination in the New World, the thought of Anglicans controlling a college in New York did not sit well with New York Presbyterians, particularly William Livingston, William Smith Jr., and John Morin, New York Presbyterian attorneys and editors of the *Independent Reflector*. These New Side Presbyterians argued in the *Reflector* that the proposed college would best serve the public interest if it were publicly controlled, not dominated by any particular religious group, that is, Anglicans. When it was proposed to require that the president of King's College be an Anglican, Livingston played to the historic Presbyterian defense "of religious conscience against an oppressive Anglican Church," and argued that "such tests" threatened to establish religious persecution in New York.⁷²

This was the crux of the matter for the editors of the *Reflector*. While they had no problem with the College of New Jersey being run by Presbyterians, King's College, as an Anglican institution, "would represent a national church with a privileged position in the ecclesiastical order." Such a situation would threaten the safe, indeed dominant, position that dissenting traditions had established in the New World. In place of such an establishment, the editors of the *Reflector* promoted a "marketplace in religious ideas" freed from the interference of the state. This was, as Bernard Bailyn noted, "the first time in American history [that] the conception [was advanced] that public institutions, because they were 'public,' should be if not secular at least nondenominational."⁷³

To the dismay of the editors of the *Reflector*, when the charter was approved in 1754, Samuel Johnson sat in the president's chair, and Anglicans dominated the board of governors. Even so, this was something of a hollow victory for the Anglicans. In contrast to Princeton, which graduated two hundred twenty young men destined for ministry from 1748 through 1778, King's College graduated only twenty students who entered the Anglican priesthood from 1754 to the American Revolution.⁷⁴ The vibrant educational mission of

New Side Presbyterians stood in stark relief not only to their Old Side colleagues, but also to their Anglican opponents. As summarized by the historian of King's College,

Princeton was managed by ministers who were trying to save mankind and who needed a flow of new clerics to do it. They rushed their institution into operation, graduated the first class a year later, and conscientiously sought large numbers of students through low fees and scholarship funds. The founders of King's College dallied for years over organizing the college, then the governors graduated the first class four years after it opened, refused to risk financial adversity by charging competitive fees, and spurned the idea of financial aid to needy students.⁷⁵

This energy and deep sense of purpose would continue to drive New Side Presbyterians as external and internal conflicts confronted the colonies and their churches. Moreover, this conflict, by "transferring an ecclesiastical controversy over to the public arena," dramatically raised the public conversation about the relation of religious and civil liberty, a conversation that would significantly exercise colonial Presbyterians in the years ahead.⁷⁶