

# America: Themes and Presbyterian Beginnings

## I. Characteristics of American Christianity

### A. Predominantly Protestant

1. Evangelical Protestantism
2. Revivalistic Protestantism
3. Numerically dominant Protestantism

### B. A Religious “Free Market”

1. With no established church, all the churches, cults, etc. competed with each
2. Denominations compete in growth
3. Voluntarism—supporting churches and other charitable endeavors by voluntary offerings rather than by taxes
4. Experimentation—Proliferation of cults and sects
5. Pragmatism: “Success” often defined by who’s the biggest

### C. Freedom of Religion

1. Not simply religious toleration
2. Separation of Church and State established by the Constitution—equality of all religions before the state
3. Roger Williams (forerunner)—Protect religion from the state
4. Contemporary twist: Religion “private,” not in the public square

### D. Protestant Dominance of Culture

1. An unofficial “established church”—interdenominational Protestantism
2. Culture dominated by Protestant influence
3. “Benevolence Empire”—a variety of institutions and crusades to promote Christianity
4. Begins to break up c. 1900 & finally ceases with “post-Christian” radicalism of 1960s

## II. Themes

### A. “City set on a hill”

1. From John Winthrop on the *Arbella*, the idea that God has a covenant with His people to make them a light to all nations
2. Develops into American “exceptionalism” (e.g., Manifest Destiny), that America has a special place of prominence in the plans of Providence

### B. Democratization—everybody equal in religion, as in everything else

1. Jacksonian democracy in religion—Since rise of Andrew Jackson in 1820s, there has been a strong trend of egalitarian anti-elitism that affects religions
2. Examples
  - a. Growth of Methodists—with their Arminian free will, they appealed to the common man against the predestinate elect of Calvinism
  - b. Charles Finney—brought religiously democratic ideas to non-Methodists
  - c. Common Sense Realism: Dominant approach to philosophy

### C. Civil Religion

1. Religious sentiment used to bind a people together; Patriotism + Piety = Civil Religion
2. America’s national “faith” in God’s guidance & protection (Robert Bellah)
  - a. Documents such as the Declaration of Independence and Constitution serving almost as a kind of holy writ
  - b. Draws from Christianity but distinctly American

- c. Another “unofficial establishment”
  - 3. Expressions: National anthem, national motto (“In God we trust”), addition of “under God” to Pledge of Allegiance (from Gettysburg Address)
- III. A “Christian America”?
- A. Question
  - 1. Is America a Christian nation or a nation with a Christian heritage?
  - 2. “Christian America” position
    - a. Founding Fathers intended to establish a nation w/ an exclusively Christian basis
    - b. America has a special covenant relationship w/ God w/ blessings & responsibilities
    - c. America called to “repent” and restore Christian foundations
- B. Problems with “Christian nation” concept
  - 1. Is there a biblical basis for saying that a modern nation-state can be in a covenant relationship with God, as Israel was?
  - 2. Difficult to prove a thoroughly Christian origin to the United States
    - a. A mixture of Enlightenment ideas (e.g., Jefferson and natural rights), Christian ideas (covenant), & others (e.g., Greco-Roman)
    - b. Some appeal to *real* “founding fathers” (original colonists) with better but not entire success
  - 3. Theological problem: Insufficient attention to Jesus Christ
- C. A Balanced Response
  - 1. America is still the most Christian industrialized nation
  - 2. Recall a real Christian heritage without assuming God’s special relationship to the United States of America
- IV. Presbyterian Origins in America
- A. Background
  - 1. Puritan Influence
    - a. Some Puritans leaned toward presbyterian polity, but never formed a presbytery
    - b. Early “Presbyterian” congregations in NY as early as 1640s
  - 2. Scots-Irish Influence from Ulster
  - 3. Dual Influences = Tension
    - a. Ethnic/cultural tensions
    - b. Theological tensions, notably over differing view of subscription to Westminster standards → Scots more strict.
- B. Francis Makemie, Father of American Presbyterianism
  - 1. Background
    - a. Parents were Covenanters who fled to Ulster
    - b. Makemie came to North America (Maryland) at age 25 in 1683 after some mission work in Barbados
  - 2. Ministry
    - a. The Presbyterian equivalent of circuit-riding
    - b. Worked in Maryland, Virginia, Middle Atlantic
  - 3. Work for Religious Liberty
    - a. Won major court cases in Virginia and New York that secured protection of English Act of Toleration for non-Anglicans
    - b. Important because Presbyterians were not officially recognized—Presbyterianism in America never had official state support

## C. Formation of American Presbyterian Church

### 1. Origins

- a. First presbytery, Presbytery of Philadelphia, in North America (1706)
- b. Jedediah Andrews of Philadelphia—first settled Presbyterian minister
- c. American Presbyterianism built from “bottom up” (presbyteries first), giving presbyteries more power than in Scotland (notably over ordination)
- d. Birth of the “mainline” American Presbyterian Church [railroad term]

### 2. Adopting Act (1729)

- a. Question: How to ensure that candidates for the ministry were orthodox?
  - 1) Scottish: Require express subscription (declared obedience and submission to) Westminster Standards.
  - 2) English/Puritan: Examine candidates closely on personal views
- b. Details
  - 1) Required “agreement in, and approbation of” of the Standards in “all essential and necessary articles”
  - 2) Allowed “scruples” on some matters
  - 3) Presbyteries approved candidates by ruling on scruples
  - 4) Many long battles over what is “essential and necessary”
  - 5) **“Loose”** vs. **“Strict”** subscription

## D. Important Distinctions

### 1. Location: Primarily Middle Colonies & South

### 2. Free church, not established

### 3. Confessional vs. Evangelical

#### a. Confessional (Scottish tendency)

- 1) Christian nurture by Word & sacrament and catechism
- 2) Confessions & examination as doctrinal safeguards
- 3) Strict subscription to confessions
- 4) Assumption of Spirit’s work in sacramental ministry to the church
- 5) Strongly church/denominationally oriented

#### b. Evangelical (English Puritan tendency)

- 1) Conversion the central experience of the Christian life
- 2) Doctrinally orthodox but true piety as major safeguard
- 3) Loose subscription to confessions
- 4) Need for Spirit-anointed preaching & ministry [cannot just be assumed]
- 5) Open to interdenominational cooperation