

## I. IDENTIFYING THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

- A. The term “Presbyterian” means ...
  - 1. A type of church government
  - 2. The movement started by reformers such as Calvin, Zwingli, and others
- B. *John Calvin was always quite involved with government, and the history of the Presbyterian movement is frequently a study of the history of that movement’s interaction with governments of the world.*
  - 1. The Presbyterian movement is named after a form of church government
  - 2. Calvin was a controlling factor in the government of Geneva when he was living there
  - 3. Knox was often in conflict with the government of Scotland
  - 4. J. N. Ogilvie notes that the “European heritage” of the Presbyterians was to unify “church and state” (but that the American’s did not follow this pattern).
- C. On the European Continent and in the British Isles, the Presbyterian “church” is known as the Reformed Church. On the U. S. Continent it is known as the Presbyterian Church<sup>1</sup>
- D. The Presbyterian Church in each of these three geographic areas has a different history
- E. On the European Continent, John Calvin was its principle exponent
- F. In Scotland, John Knox was the driving force
- G. In the United States, the Presbyterian Church gains attributes from both the European and Scottish-Irish Presbyterian movements
- H. The Presbyterian church in the U. S. was not planted or controlled by either of its foreign counterparts.
  - 1. It is independent in nature just as the U. S. is independent from Britain
  - 2. It was heavily influenced doctrinally and financially by European/British factors

## II. HISTORY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ON THE EUROPEAN CONTINENT

- A. John Calvin is the uncontested founder of Presbyterianism in general, and the Presbyterian movement on the European Continent in particular.
- B. Martin Bucer<sup>2</sup> is considered by some to be the “genius behind Calvin’s work”
  - 1. Born in Alsatia in 1491; died at Cambridge in 1551
  - 2. Mary the Bloody imported a band of “thugs” who held a mock trial over Bucer’s grave and then dug him up and burned him at the stake.
  - 3. Bucer’s first wife was a former nun; he married a second and then third time after his wives were deceased.
  - 4. Bucer is know to have been influenced by Erasmus and Luther
- C. Geneva Switzerland was the home of Calvin and the seat of Presbyterian thought (Reformed thought) in the mid 1500’s.
- D. France, the Netherlands, and Germany were variously affected by Presbyterian thought and churches began in these countries.
- E. By 1571 French Calvinists claimed over 2,100 churches
- F. These Calvinist churches in Europe seem to have been somewhat independent of one another; their history is not as easily evaluated as those movements with more central control (i.e. the Lutherans)



Martin Bucer  
(1491-1551)

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<sup>1</sup> See Encyclopedia Americana, 1967, Vol 22.

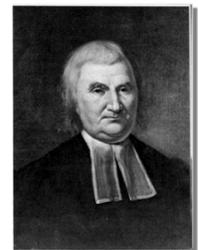
<sup>2</sup> [www.go-newfocus.co.uk/articles/martin\\_bucer.htm](http://www.go-newfocus.co.uk/articles/martin_bucer.htm)

### **III. HISTORY OF THE PRESBYTERIANS IN SCOTLAND**

- A. Scotland is where the term “Presbyterian” was coined
- B. John Knox was the creator and sustainer of the Scottish Calvinist movement which began in 1559 upon his return from exile in France
- C. It struggled with Roman Catholicism and won quickly, then faced a longer battle with Episcopalianism
- D. In 1953 the Scottish Presbyterian church claimed over 1.25 million in 30,000 churches

### **IV. PRESBYTERIAN HISTORY IN THE UNITED STATES**

- A. The Presbyterian origins in this country are found in New England Puritans in 1640 in Long Island and in other places such as the Eastern Shore of Maryland in the late 1600's
- B. The first “presbytery” was formed in 1706 and contained seven ministers
- C. The Westminster confession was enforced by some in the early 1700's in an attempt to keep “radical theology” out of the Presbyterian movement.
- D. The Presbyterians were almost universally in favor of the American Revolution
- E. In 1788 the Presbyterians organized into a General Assembly with four Synods which required “subscription to the ‘Faith of this Church’”.
- F. Presbyterians and Congregationalists formed a “Plan of Union” in 1801.
- G. The Presbyterians utilized the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (1810) for much of their “benevolent work.”
- H. The Presbyterians separated into two groups before and during the Civil War as slavery was an issue upon which they could not agree. They reunited in 1869.
- I. The Presbyterian church slowly lost the battle against Modernism and Liberalism
  - 1. In 1903 the Westminster Confession was modified
  - 2. By 1930 theological liberalism was in control
- J. Today, Presbyterians are divided into two groups as it has for a long while
  - 1. Presbyterian Church U. S. A. is by far the largest with over three million members in over 11,000 churches, but it declined by more than 10% in the last decade
  - 2. The Presbyterian Church of America claims 300,000 members in 1400 churches
- K. The division in Presbyterianism began in the days of George Whitefield and the New Revivalism
  - 1. Old School Presbyterian thought was that God called man and revivalism was to be opposed
  - 2. New School thought said that revivalism was genuine
    - a. These men paid less attention to the importance of college level training for ministers
    - b. They recruited common men to the pulpit
- L. The sides were divided then reunited in 1757 and claimed 200 congregations and 10,000 members in 1758.
- M. John Witherspoon, the president of Princeton (founded 1746) was the only ministerial signer of the Declaration of Independence and was a member of the Continental Congress.
- N. In 1837, four New School presbyteries were expelled over matters of discipline and use of missionary money.
- O. In 1846 the Old School assembly regarded slavery as a “no bar” to Christian communion but the New School rejected slavery.
- P. By 1857 several southern synods had withdrawn to form the United Synod. This ultimately became the Presbyterian Church U. S. A. (PCUSA) in 1865. (Emphasizes Calvinism)
- Q. By 1954 there were eleven different Presbyterian “denominations” in the U. S. (all of which



John Witherspoon

subscribe to the Westminster confession – more or less)

**V. THE HISTORY AND STRUCTURE OF THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION**

- A. See [http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf\\_with\\_proofs/](http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/) for a complete copy (and other important documents such as the variations of the WCF).
- B. The WCF consists of 33 doctrinal “chapters” on various topics ranging from the Bible to divorce, salvation, sacraments, etc.
- C. On July 1, 1643 an assembly of 60 to 70 delegates met in the Abbey Church in Westminster in order to formulate a Reformed confession of faith
  - 1. Dr. William Twisse was the parliament-appointed moderator
  - 2. As with most early Presbyterian effort, this was a governmentally ordained meeting
  - 3. A governmental ordinance had been issued commanding, “that the divines meet in King Henry VII’s chapel at Westminster beginning July 1, 1643 with both a positive task and a negative one”
    - a. To set down the biblical patterns of the reformation faith in the areas of liturgy [worship form] and polity [church government]
    - b. To defend such reformation distinctives from false aspersions, misconstructions, and attack
- D. The original intent of the meeting was to simply refine the 39 Articles and they proceeded on this course for ten weeks.
- E. The Assembly ultimately, in 1647, submitted the Confession to Parliament with scriptural proofs. Parliament finished its review in June of 1648, and ordered a printing of it in that same month.
- F. See <http://www.auburn.edu/~downejm/sp/asmhist.htm> for additional information

**VI. THE DOCTRINE OF THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH (WCF)**

- A. The WCF sets forth a position on the Bible, God, the Trinity, etc. in its first chapters
  - 1. It specifically denounces the Apocrypha
  - 2. It proclaims the preservation of scripture by God’s providence
  - 3. “Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass, upon all supposed conditions; yet hath he not decreed any thing because he foresaw it as future, as that which would come to pass, upon such conditions.”
- B. WCF says that the covenant of grace is dispensed by the ordinances
  - 1. This is the difference between a “Protestant” church and a “Baptist” church
  - 2. If the covenant of grace is dispensed in this way, it is controlled by the church which has authority to dispense ordinances.
- C. WCF declares that man has a free will but then plainly declares that man “is not able to convert himself”
  - 1. It denies the possibility of “sinless perfection”
  - 2. It affirms the necessity that God “predestine” men to salvation because men are “altogether passive” in regard to saving themselves
  - 3. It states that some “cannot be saved”
- D. WCF says that faith “is a grace” given by God whereby the “elect” are enabled to believe
- E. Repentance is also called a “grace” given by God
- F. WCF Chapter 17 proclaims the “Perseverance of the saints” – eternal salvation and inability for men to fall once saved

Supralapsarianism - The doctrine that God decreed both election and reprobation before the fall. Supralapsarianism differs from infralapsarianism on the relation of God's decree to human sin.
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- G. WCF proclaims that divorce is acceptable, but only in the instance of adultery and “wilful desertion”
- H. WCF declares the church to be universal in Chapter 25
  - 1. “The catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all.”
  - 2. “The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children; and is the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ; the house and family of God, through which men are ordinarily saved and union with which is essential to their best growth and service.”
  - 3. “This catholic Church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less, visible. And particular Churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them.”
- I. WCF Ch. 27 says the sacraments are “seals of the covenant of grace”
- J. WCF CH. 28 applies to Baptism
  - 1. “Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church, but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, or his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins . . .”
  - 2. “Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person.”
  - 3. “Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized.”
  - 4. “Although it be a great sin to contemn or neglect this ordinance, yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it as that no person can be regenerated or saved without it, or that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated.”
  - 5. Infant baptism is endorsed
- K. Regarding the Lord’s supper, WCF says that Christ is “not offered up” again and it repudiates transubstantiation
- L. WCF Ch. 31 declares the importance of church government via the use of Synods
  - 1. These synods are given power to decide doctrine
  - 2. A synod is a council or “assembly” of church officials (i.e. ministers from many congregations)
  - 3. Presbyterian government is hierarchical and consists of four levels (session, presbytery, synod, and General Assembly)