In Search of Unity: Presbyterians in the Wake of the First Great Awakening

by John Fea

This article explores the Presbyterian Church in the wake of the eighteenth-century evangelical revival commonly referred to as the First Great Awakening. This revival badly divided the Presbyterian Church into Old Side and New Side factions and tore at the very fabric of local Presbyterian communities. In the decades following the Awakening, Presbyterians embraced Enlightenment views of morality and order to help them in their efforts to heal the revival wounds and restore unity to the church. Some of the most divisive evangelical Presbyterians during the 1740s repented of their schismatic practices, and Presbyterian communities experienced local awakenings stemming from a renewed sense of harmony and peace. By the 1760s, a strong and reunified Presbyterian denomination was ready to make a significant contribution to a revolutionary age.

In 1743, Robert Jenney, the missionary-priest assigned to the city of Philadelphia by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, informed his Anglican superiors in London that "The Presbyterians are almost broken to pieces." [1] Jenney's comment must be understood as the triumphant words of an eighteenth-century Anglican missionary struggling to gain a foothold for the mother church in the religiously diverse Delaware Valley, but in the end he was right. He wrote this letter in the aftermath of the colony-wide evangelical revival known as the First Great Awakening.

Recently, historians have explained this revival in terms of the unity it brought to religious life in the colonies. In this explanation, the preaching of George Whitefield, the so-called "Grand Itinerant," united colonists of different Protestant persuasions around a shared "born-again" experience. But while this interpretation has merit—the Great Awakening was indeed a unifying event for evangelicals—it fails to take seriously the divisiveness of the revival, particularly as it affected American Presbyterians. As Jenney observed, the awakening tore at the religious fabric of Presbyterian congregations, communities and, of course, the entire denomination. Presbyterians were left reeling in the aftermath of the revival. At the local level, among the congregations and communities where the Reformed faith was lived, the Presbyterian landscape of the early mid-Atlantic was an ecclesiastical war zone. Congregations were rent by the controversial way in which the New Birth was spread, and the witness of the Presbyterian Church in the British-American colonies had been tarnished by this religious culture war. The passions associated with revivalism, the otherworldly focus of religious enthusiasm, and the divisive nature of New Side preachers and their followers contributed to the "broken" state of the church in a way that even the Presbyterian supporters of revivalism could not ignore.

In the years between the First Great Awakening and the coming of the American Revolution, Presbyterians set out to rebuild their broken church. They would be successful in their endeavors by making accommodations to the spirit of the age. The church, in other words, made its peace with the Enlightenment. Be-

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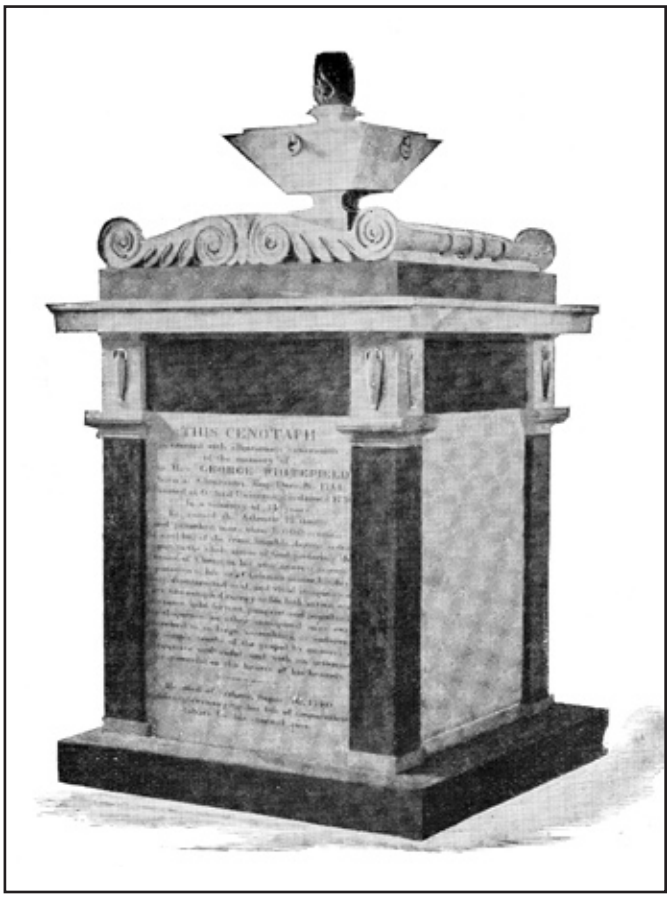
tween 1745 and 1770, the New Side Presbyterianism of the First Great Awakening was transformed. Enlightenment concerns with social order, the rational control of the religious passions, and the celebration of the things that united rather than divided human beings and their institutions meshed well with the concerns of both the opponents and the supporters of the revival. Presbyterianism converged with the Enlightenment in this era to provide the scaffolding necessary to rebuild the church and enable it to engage the surrounding culture. Two decades after the Great Awakening, evangelical Presbyterianism and the Enlightenment were hand-in-glove in a way that would have been inconceivable in the early 1740s—a time when the beliefs and behavior of Presbyterian evangelicalism were associated with an anti-intellectual piety less concerned with rational or confessional explanations of the faith, and more concerned with saving as many souls as possible from eternal damnation.

Presbyterians and the First Great Awakening

The First Great Awakening unleashed on the British Atlantic world a new style of Protestant religion that took to new heights time-honored Christian concerns with the spread of the gospel. Proponents of this form of evangelical Protestantism preached the necessity of the New Birth, or the belief that one could be regenerated by the spirit of God immediately, apart from the communal nurturing of a local congregation. Revival evangelicalism divided the Presbyterian Church. Factions developed among the clergy over how to respond to this new emphasis on individual and immediate conversion. On the one hand, ministers who came to be called "Old Side" refused to allow the evangelical conversion experience to trump conformity to the Westminster Confession of Faith as the distinguishing mark of the Presbyterian Church. They emphasized the importance of a visible church made up of all who were baptized into the community and willing to conform to the teaching of the Westminster Confession and submit to the authority of the synod, presbyteries, and local church sessions. The church, they argued, would always include the converted and the unconverted. Clergymen labeled "New Side," on the other hand, claimed to be members of an invisible church of the converted. New Siders believed that subscription to the Westminster Confession was important, but that the intellectual assent to a body of correct theology, without the New Birth, could not save



The cenotaph in memory of George Whitefield in Old South Presbyterian Church, Newburyport, Massachusetts, was designed by Strickland and cut in marble by Strothers of Philadelphia. From *George Whitefield, the Awakener* by A.D. Belden (London: Sampson, Low, Marston & Co., 1930).

one's soul. Old Side clergy did not think that New Side preachers behaved in an orderly way. They complained that the New Side displayed little concern with the proper state of the church in this world, because they were too busy winning converts to the spiritual fellowship of the next world.

The differences between these two factions were played out in fierce battles over the practice of itinerant preaching and ministerial education. The Old Side believed educated ministers of local congregations, working in conjunction with presbyteries and synods, were best suited to keep an orderly Presbyterian Church. Itinerancy often undermined the authority of these local guardians of Presbyterian communities. Much of the Old Side disgust with this practice was directed toward Gilbert Tennent, the minister of the New Brunswick, New Jersey, Presbyterian Church. In his sermon, *The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry*, Tennent exhorted New Side itinerants to identify,

in public orations, local ministers who could not testify to an evangelical conversion experience. He then encouraged the parishioners of these unconverted pastors to leave their churches and seek out a congregation with a minister who was preaching a message in sympathy with New Side concerns. Old Side clergymen were often willing to admit that some of their number could not testify to a conversion experience. Some even saw this as a serious problem. They disapproved, however, of the way that New Side ministers exposed this problem by outing unregenerate pastors in public sermons, rather than from behind the closed doors of the synod or presbytery.

The New Side countered by arguing that itinerancy was necessary because Presbyterian laypersons were spiritually perishing under the care of "graceless and unfaithful Ministers." The salvation of souls, they believed, was a higher priority than the preservation of order.[2] The Philadelphia Synod, which was controlled by Old Side clergy, did not see it this way. In May 1737, the synod declared that probationary clergymen (or those licensed but not ordained or installed in a specific church) would no longer be permitted to preach in vacant pulpits without the permission of the specific Presbytery that had authority over the congregation with the vacancy. The following year the synod became even more specific, directing its decree to those clergymen who traveled within the bounds of presbyteries other than their own and had a "Tendency to procure Divisions and Disorders."[3]

The debate over itinerancy was related to a similar battle over how to define the historic Presbyterian commitment to an educated clergy. Much of the controversy in this regard centered on Log College, a Presbyterian academy in Neshaminy, Pennsylvania. Directed by the Reverend William Tennent (Gilbert's father), Log College established a reputation for graduating ministerial candidates who championed revival evangelicalism. According to the Old Side, much of what was wrong with the Presbyterian Church could be blamed on Log College alumni traveling throughout the region preaching divisive sermons in vacant pulpits outside the bounds of their presbyteries. Some of them had performed poorly on licensing examinations, prompting the Philadelphia Synod to question the school's ability to properly train Presbyterian ministers for ordination. In 1738, the synod pushed forward a proposal requiring a ministerial candidate to possess a degree from a European or New

This illustration of the log meetinghouse where Faggs Manor Presbyterian Church met from 1740 to 1742 is based on historical records that described the original building. From *A History of Faggs Manor United Presbyterian Church, 1730-1980* (Cochranville, Pa.: Faggs Manor United Presbyterian Church, 1980).

England (Harvard or Yale) college. Resistance to this decree came from the newly formed New Brunswick Presbytery, a haven for Log College graduates. Since the synod's education proposal meant that alumni of the Neshaminy school would not be permitted to serve the church as clergymen, the New Brunswick ministers refused to abide by it. In defiance of the order, they continued to ordain Log College men. The synod responded, after much debate and several attempts to reach a compromise, by expelling the rebel presbytery in 1741. Following its expulsion, the New Brunswick Presbytery—and its supporters in other presbyteries, the most significant being the Presbytery of New York—united in 1745 to form the Synod of New York. The Presbyterian Church in British colonial America would remain formally divided between Old Side (Philadelphia Synod) and New Side (New York Synod) factions until they were reunited in 1758.

The Presbyterian politics stemming from the First Great Awakening also had a significant effect on local congregational life. Nearly forty percent of Presbyterian congregations in the colonies were divided over Great Awakening–related issues. Clergymen were removed because their criticism or support of the awakening was not embraced by the members of their congregations. Churches such as First Philadelphia, Brandywine, Faggs Manor, and Neshaminy, in Pennsylvania; Bedford, in New York; Rock, in Fair Hill, Maryland; and Lewes and Cool Spring, in Delaware, to name a few, were split into rival factions, resulting in Old Side and New Side congregations in the same or neighboring

towns. Such controversy had both ecclesiastical and economic ramifications for Presbyterian congregations. Which faction would maintain control of the meetinghouse? Could the newly formed congregations that separated from an existing local church afford to hire a clergyman of their own? Religious life on the ground was weakened severely as a result of these splits, as the spiritual care of everyday Presbyterians was subordinated to the realities of denominational and theological politics.

Healing the Wounds

What were the circumstances leading to the reunion of the Old Side and New Side in 1758? How did the Presbyterian Church handle, as Robert Jenney described it, its "broken" state of affairs? Presbyterian attempts to heal the wounds inflicted by the Great Awakening were part of a general cultural trend pervading the British American colonies in the period between 1745 and 1765. The values of love, brotherhood, and unity gained popularity in provincial life as a means of sustaining social cohesiveness and moral order in an era of political instability, imperial war with France and its corresponding threat to British civilization, demographic changes and ethnic strife stemming from new patterns of immigration, and, of course, an acrimonious religious revival. As the historian Steven Bullock has noted, those influenced by the social theory of the Enlightenment—a vision of everyday life defined by reason, balance, and order—believed that selflessness and benevolence could serve as a potent antidote to the "particular divisiveness of American society." Such a vision was appealing because it required persons to unite around the things that were common to all human beings (at least those who were white and male) and look beyond the particularities that made them different. For Christians, this kind of universalism was not unlike Jesus' prayer in the Gospels (John 17:21) that his church "all may be one," but it was also an ideal at the heart of the Enlightenment in America. When cultivated in a rational way, love and its sister virtues of peace and harmony, offered hope to those attempting to navigate the turbulence of mid-eighteenth-century British American life.[4]

This new cultural spirit had profound effects on American religion during this period. By the mid-1740s, denominations rent by the Great Awakening were seeking ways of putting aside their theological differences and uniting around the religious beliefs that they held in common. Other denominations, some of which had reputations for disorder and religious enthusiasm during the awakening, began to work toward better and more efficient means of organization. For example, attempts were made in 1745 to bring German and Swedish Lutherans together under a unified synod. While both of these groups could trace their history to the Lutheran wing of the Protestant Reformation, they were divided in America by language and the degree to which they were willing to embrace continental pietism. Similarly, in 1747, German Reformed ministers established the Coetus of Pennsylvania, the first official body of German-speaking Calvinists in America. One year later the Moravian Church brought much-needed order to its fold by establishing a synod for ministers. Even the Society of Friends, a group on the fringe of colonial Protestantism (but still quite mainstream in the Delaware Valley), began to emphasize spiritual unity around obedience to Quaker moral codes.

The successful reunion of Presbyterians in 1758 was another example of this religious and cultural season. In May, Presbyterians representing the Philadelphia Synod and the New York Synod met in Philadelphia to confirm a proposed plan that would put their broken denomination back together again. As part of the settlement, both sides agreed to affirm the Westminster Confession of Faith *and* the importance of conversion to the Christian life. The Old Side conceded that the Great Awakening was a "gracious work of God," and the New Side concurred that conversion was a rational process void of enthusiastic behavior. The licensing of ministerial candidates was turned over to the presbyteries, though the Plan of Union warned against clergymen publicly accusing fellow ministers of "Heterodoxy, Insufficiency, or Immorality." The union did not end all of the bitter feelings or theological differences between the Old Side and the New Side, but some degree of peace had been restored among British American Presbyterians. After seventeen years of division, the church could now move forward into the uncertainties of a revolutionary age with a renewed sense of unity and purpose.[5]

The Presbyterian move toward reconciliation in 1758 began long before the awakening fires had a chance to cool. While many New Side clergymen were still roaming the region on their feverish quest for souls, Presbyterians who feared that the Great Awakening had the potential of moving too

strongly in a radical direction preached sermons and published tracts in favor of moderation. Jonathan Dickinson, the settled clergyman at Elizabeth-Town (now Elizabeth), New Jersey, forged a well-respected career from attempts to broker some sort of compromise that might bring the Old Side and New Side back together. Dickinson never abandoned his belief in the importance of conversion and experimental religion, and he defended the revival as a work of God on more than one occasion. However, he was convinced that evangelicalism must be practiced rationally, without the passion-driven behavior that led to the rift in the colonial Presbyterian Church. Moderates, many of whom were members of the New York Presbytery, condemned New Side clergymen's practice of invading the pulpits of fellow ministers and pronouncing them unconverted. They preferred that ministerial candidates be educated in respectable, well-established schools. Thus, they worked diligently in the 1746 formation of a college—the College of New Jersey at Princeton—that could offer students the best of Enlightenment learning and Presbyterian evangelicalism. Such attempts to balance piety with a rational approach to Presbyterian faith reflected one of several ways that the Enlightenment influenced the church in the decades following the Great Awakening.

By 1742, Jonathan Dickinson's moderate evangelical camp was growing. In February, Gilbert Tennent wrote a letter of apology to Dickinson for some of his misguided behavior during the height of the awakening. He repented over the "excessive heart of temper which has sometime appeared in my conduct" and claimed to have since developed a "clear view of the danger of every thing which tends to enthusiasm and divisiveness in the visible church." Tennent expressed regret over nearly every issue that had led to the Old Side/New Side divisions of the previous years, including the role he played in dividing churches, his "pernicious" practice of declaring fellow ministers unconverted, and his "perverse" defense of an uneducated ministry.[6] He eventually accepted a call to pastor Philadelphia's Second Presbyterian Church and started publishing essays and sermons such as *The Danger of Spiritual Pride Represented* (1744); *Irenicium Ecclesiasticum, or a Humble Impartial Essay Upon the Peace of Jerusalem* (1749); *Brotherly Love Recommended* (1748); and *Blessedness of Peace-Makers Represented* (1765). He also began to dress in a more refined fashion and became more literary in his sermons.

As the number of moderate Presbyterians grew steadily in the years following the Great Awakening, these clergymen began to practice an evangelical Calvinism that was concerned not only with the otherworldly aspects of faith but also with the ways in which evangelicalism might serve the moral good of *this* world. While evangelicals focused first and foremost on a proper "vertical" relationship with God attained through conversion, they also began to take seriously their responsibility to promote Godly "horizontal" relationships within society, through obedience to the ethical commands of scripture grounded in God's moral law. Early American Calvinists believed that the Old Testament law was ultimately a means of exposing sin and pointing people to the regenerative power of New Testament grace, but it could also serve, secondarily, as a moral rule for the larger society. Furthermore, the New Testament exhortations such as the Golden Rule or the Fruits of the Spirit were loaded with social requirements that, when obeyed, contributed to a society that was ethical and upright. Evangelical Calvinists upheld God's moral law as a standard to measure public virtue. Thus, even with its millennial vision, otherworldly focus, and commitment to original sin, evangelical Calvinism could still contribute to an orderly and benevolent world.

This Presbyterian social vision was evident in Samuel Davies's last valedictory address to the senior class at the College of New Jersey. Davies had gained a reputation for promoting religious revival among the growing number of Presbyterians in Virginia and quickly became one of the church's most prominent clergymen, leading to his appointment as president of the Presbyterian college at Princeton in 1757. In a 1760 address that was later published as *Religion and Public Spirit*, Davies challenged each student to serve his generation as a "proper Member of human Society." God's purposes in this world, he exhorted, are carried out through the cultivation of "*social* Connections" and a "love" of one's fellow human beings. Davies wanted his graduates to serve the church, but he also urged them to use their liberal education to "Extend the Arms of your Benevolence to embrace your Friends, your Neighbours, your Country, your Nation, the whole race of Mankind, even your Enemies." The goal was to "leave the World wiser and better, than you found it at your Entrance." The Princeton class of 1760 had a mandate from their president to work for the public good

and serve the various communities in which they found themselves without being seduced by "private Interests."[7]

Davies's address illustrates the complicated interplay between Presbyterianism and the Enlightenment in early American religious life. His emphasis on *this* world and his exhortation to improve society placed *Religion and Public Spirit* at the center of the eighteenth-century British Enlightenment. Enlightened people hoped that the present age could be more enlightened than the past. Armed with this progressive ideal, they strove to leave the world better than it was when they entered it. Social improvement and the moral advancement of public life were important to this generation of Presbyterians, even those who, like Davies and his New Side colleagues, had built a reputation for being more concerned with their followers' preparation for the next world than their meaningful contribution to this one. Davies's call to treat one's fellow man with a spirit of brotherly love reflected the Enlightenment's universalistic approach to the world and the general spirit of social virtue at work in the culture of America's educated classes in the decades following the First Great Awakening. Piety was important, but so was moral improvement.

A rational faith that tempered enthusiasm and a Calvinism that took seriously the church's social obligations had always been important to ministers of the Old Side. It was now, however, becoming a vital component of New Side thought as well. In this sense, the New Side's moderate turn led its supporters to become more amenable to longstanding Presbyterian commitments to the authority of synods and the importance of settled and educated clergymen. *All* Presbyterians were now extolling the God of order, and they were ready with scripture to defend Him. Some of the passages of the Bible that they employed were 1 Corinthians 14:40 ("Let all things be done decently and in order"); 1 Corinthians 14:33 ("For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints"); and 2 Thessalonians 3:6-7 ("Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us. For yourselves know how ye ought to follow us: for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you). These verses were summed up best by a post-awakening Gilbert Tennent, when he wrote that "God is not the Author of Confusion, but of Peace, and therefore of Order, which is the Contrary of Confusion, and the antecedent of Peace."[8] Presbyterians were convinced that their church was built on this biblical understanding of order as encapsulated in the Westminster Confession. Anyone who challenged such order through divisive behavior was acting in a manner that was ungodly and sinful.

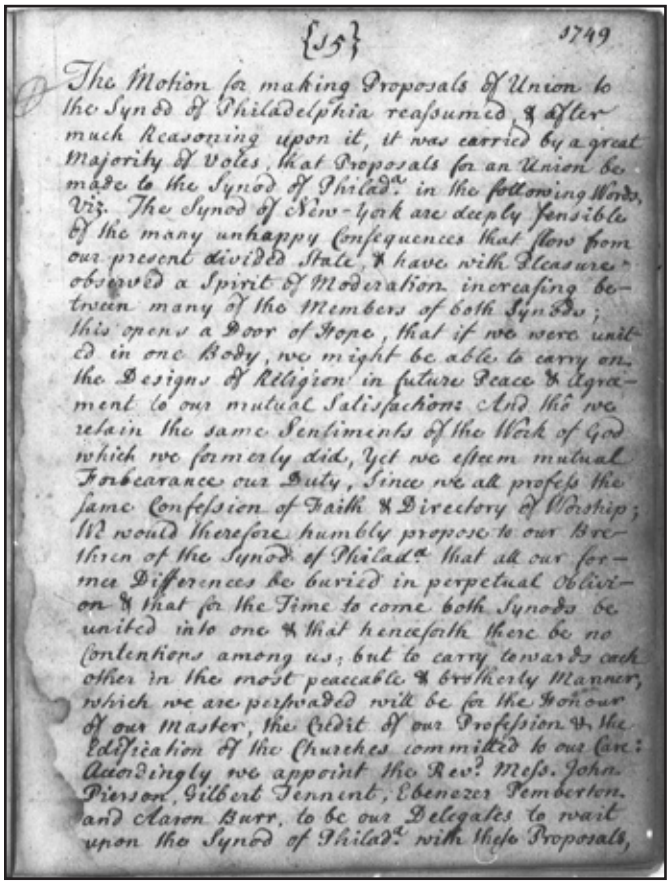
As Presbyterians looked to the Bible to help construct an orderly church, they also turned to faculty psychology. This discipline, a subfield of moral philosophy, taught them that a society maintained order when its members learned to regulate their passions—the appetites, desires, and emotional longings present in all human beings. Passions were not wrong or disorderly in and of themselves, but they could become dangerous when not guarded by reason. The human faculties were ordered in a hierarchical manner. Reason, the chief faculty, must be cultivated with diligence so that it was strong enough to control the unruly, and naturally more powerful, passions. When passions were allowed to rage out of control, the faculties would become unbalanced, resulting in immoral and unenlightened behavior. Thus, when Enoch Green, the minister of the Deerfield, New Jersey, Presbyterian Church, warned his congregation about the dangers of slothfulness, a practice that led to an uncultivated mind where the "lusts and passions grow rampant," he was reflecting both a Christian understanding of order *and* a form of the Enlightenment. Those who did not control their passions were not only prone to sin but also, as Green wrote, a "disgrace to civil society" through their "neglect of every social duty."[9] Faculty psychology was at the core of the unified Presbyterian Church's understanding of revivalism. Unless the passions were carefully restrained, the work of God would be relegated to bedlam, as evidenced in many of the enthusiastic New Side stirs of the Great Awakening. The moral dimension of the Enlightenment, particularly its emphasis on reason over passion, offered a philosophy that Presbyterians could use to restore order to their broken church.

By 1749, Gilbert Tennent was convinced that his passions had led him astray during the height of the Great Awakening. As he continued to express his change of heart, he regularly employed the language of faculty psychology. Tennent blamed his earlier condemnations of fellow (Old Side) ministers on his inability to control his

passions. "Passion is a Blind Guide," he wrote, and it could lead, in his case, "to a Ferment of sinful Anger" that boiled in opposition to the "Righteousness of God." On the matter of those newly converted laypersons who ignited division in local congregations, Tennent noted regretfully the "Ignorance and wild fire" that "sometimes attend the Zeal of young Converts, who are Ignorant and of a passionate Temper." Tennent wrote in *Irenicum Ecclesiasticum*, "When People are divided and prejudiced against each other, they are apt, thro' the force of their Passions, to misapprehend one another's meaning," resulting in "Persons under strong Temptations in order to make themselves appear Consistent, or support what they call their Credit, to speak of Things that should be buried in silence, in an undue Manner." [10] Tennent's emphasis on the passions, and the spiritual asceticism required to control them, merged nicely with the concerns of the Enlightenment and helped define its American character.

The 1758 reunion also had its impact on local congregations. Many Presbyterians began to settle ministers who were concerned with bringing order to the divisive communities that they had inherited. Churches divided by the awakening started to reunite in the 1750s and 1760s as clergymen—many of them young and newly settled—worked hard at the task of religious reconciliation. Some congregations that had been divided over the awakening, such as Fairfield, New Jersey; Bedford; and Faggs Manor, to name a few, experienced community-driven revivals during this period that swelled membership lists. Congregations that did not experience Great Awakening divisions, such Allentown, Pennsylvania, and Basking Ridge and Morristown in New Jersey, also had local revivals.

In general, Presbyterians, whether it was from revival or not, were experiencing significant growth in these decades, as evidenced by the large number of congregations that built new meetinghouses. Between 1744 and 1770, nearly half of all Presbyterian congregations in the British American colonies constructed, renovated, or enlarged their church buildings. Since erecting a meetinghouse required the financial support of the congregation (and the sacrifice of a local religious community) and were usually built due to the pressing need for space in the sanctuary, it's safe to suggest that this practice was yet another example of a restored Presbyterian order in the wake of the Great Revival of the early 1740s.



{35} 1749

The Motion for making Proposals of Union to the Synod of Philadelphia reassumed & after much Reasoning upon it, it was carried by a great Majority of Votes, that Proposals for an Union be made to the Synod of Philad.ª in the following Words, Viz. The Synod of New-York are deeply sensible of the many unhappy Consequences that flow from our present divided State, & have with Pleasure observed a Spirit of Moderation increasing between many of the Members of both Synods; this opens a Door of Hope, that if we were united in one Body, we might be able to carry on the Designs of Religion in future Peace & Agreement to our mutual Satisfaction: And tho' we retain the same Sentiments of the Work of God which we formerly did, Yet we esteem mutual Forbearance our Duty, Since we all profess the same Confession of Faith & Directory of Worship; We would therefore humbly propose to our Brethren of the Synod of Philad.ª that all our former Differences be buried in perpetual Oblivion & that for the Time to come both Synods be united into one & that henceforth there be no Contentions among us; but to carry towards each other in the most peaceable & brotherly Manner, which we are perswaded will be for the Honour of our Master, the Credit of our Profession & the Edification of the Churches committed to our Care: Accordingly we appoint the Revd Messs. John Pierson, Gilbert Tennent, Ebenezer Pemberton, and Aaron Burr, to be our Delegates to wait upon the Synod of Philad.ª with these Proposals,

This proposal to the Synod of Philadelphia for union was recorded in the Minutes of the Synod of New York, May 17, 1749. (Presbyterian Historical Society.)

Conclusion

Gilbert Tennent described best the spirit of the reunion that had come to characterize the Presbyterian Church in the aftermath of the First Great Awakening. The once-great promoter of divisive revivalism was now talking about a different kind of spiritual and religious renewal—one of unity and harmony and strength. He wrote that there was "nothing more amiable, than to see Brethren, who have been broken from one another by Division, and prejudiced against one another by angry Debate, seeking the Lord in UNION and Harmony." Such a spirit, he believed, was what drove the Presbyterian reunion of 1758 at both the denominational and local level. "There is nothing more efficacious, to excite Mankind to embrace the Gospel," Tennent believed, "than the mutual Love and Unity of the Professors of it." Religious harmony and love of all fellow Presbyterians—an ideal steeped in both Christianity and the universalism of the Enlightenment creed (and not the divisive, passion-driven efforts of revival itinerants)—

would be the true and most effective catalyst for the propagation of the gospel to the unconverted.

When viewed theologically or morally, rather than ecclesiastically or denominationally, the 1758 reunion is best understood as favoring the Old Side vision for the Presbyterian Church. Granted, the New Side gained local control over the ordination of ministers, but from now on the Presbyterian Church would be much more sober, enlightened, and ordered. There would be no more enthusiastic evangelical outbreaks for a while, and those seeking to reproduce the passions of the First Great Awakening were held in check by a strong dose of Presbyterian morality. A few examples suffice to illustrate this transformation: The post-1745 ministry of George Whitefield no longer enjoyed the same success as it had five years earlier. Disruptive Presbyterian itinerants were few and far between. Similarly, in 1772, when an evangelical revival at the College of New Jersey at Princeton got out of hand, President John Witherspoon, who would become the most important Presbyterian clergyman and statesman of the revolutionary era, disapproved of it. And in 1781, when, during the height of a religious revival in the Presbyterian Church at Fairfield, New Jersey, a man attending the meeting screamed in spiritual ecstasy from the balcony, he was quickly escorted out of the building by the church elders. These are three random examples of the way revival evangelicalism was tempered during this era, but they are representative of the spirit of the Presbyterian Church in the decades following the Great Revival. Because the New Side ministers outnumbered the Old Side ministers at the time of the reunion, this new evangelical rationalism was the best settlement available to the Old Side—and most of them were happy with it.

By 1765, the Presbyterian Church in the colonies was stronger than it had ever been. In that year, approximately two decades after the Anglican Robert Jenney had all but written off the Presbyterians, the German Lutheran minister Henry Melchior Muhlenberg made an observation about the state of religion in the British American colonies that reads like that of a twenty-first century sociologist trying to explain why some churches grow and others do not: "The English Presbyterian Church is growing so rapidly among the English in America that in a few years it will spread and surpass the Episcopal and all the rest. The *progress* is due to the fact that they have established ministers, keep strict discipline, and tolerate no ministers except those who had good moral character and the ability to speak, and who are content with small salaries and able to endure hard work. Those denominations here which do not have these characteristics, just the opposite, are consequently decreasing and making room for the Presbyterians." [11]

If Muhlenberg is correct, Presbyterians were back in force. By 1765, they had healed most of their revival wounds, had reunited, and had restored a strong sense of order. Such unity was essential for the important role that the church would play over the course of the next two decades as they began to mobilize in support of the American Revolution. ☙

Notes

[1] Robert Jenney to Bishop of London, June 24, 1743, cited in W.S. Perry, ed., Historical Collections Relating to the American Colonial Church. Vol. 2, Pennsylvania (Hartford, Conn.: Church Press, 1871), 234–235.

[2] Gilbert Tennent, Remarks Upon a Protestation (Philadelphia: B. Franklin, 1741), 20.

[3] Minutes of the Philadelphia Synod, May 1737, in Guy Klett, ed., Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1706-1788 (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1976), 150; Minutes of the Philadelphia Synod, May 1738, ibid., 153.

[4] Steven Bullock, Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) 57–59.

[5] Minutes of the Synod of New York and Philadelphia, May 1758, in Klett, ed., Minutes of the Presbyterian Church, 340–342.

[6] Quoted in Richard Webster, A History of the Presbyterian Church in America from its Origin until the Year 1760 (Philadelphia: Joseph Wilson, 1857), 189–191.

[7] Samuel Davies, Religion and Publick Spirit: A Valedictory Address to the Senior Class, Delivered in Nassau Hall, September 21, 1760 (New York: James Parker and Company, 1761), 4, 5, 7, 9.

[8] Gilbert Tennent, Irenicum Ecclesiasticum (Philadelphia: W. Bradford, 1749), 7, 10, 73.

[9] Enoch Green, Slothfulness Reproved and the Example of the Saints Proposed for Imitation (Philadelphia: D. Hall and W. Sellers, 1772), 6.

[10] Tennent, Irenicum Ecclesiasticum, 85, 92, 98, 100.

[11] Theodore G. Tappert and John W. Doberstein, trans., The Journals of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg in three volumes (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1942), 2:181.