

Francis Makemie and the Meaning of American Presbyterianism

By D. G. Hart, Ph.D.

Francis Makemie is an icon of American Presbyterianism who is more often celebrated than understood. Widely regarded as the “Father” of the American church, few Presbyterians can put together more than one sentence about his life or ministry. This ignorance itself is understandable since Makemie, like most of the founding generation of American Presbyterian ministers, left behind few records or manuscripts from which either to commemorate or assess his contribution. As such, Makemie functions as the malleable hero whom students of American Presbyterians can shape for their own purposes. At the same time, the lack of material on the founder of American Presbyterianism says something important not only about the hardships under which Makemie labored to plant the American church but also about the kind of Presbyterianism that would emerge in the New World. What follows is an effort first to fill in some of the gaps about colonial Presbyterianism’s most prominent minister, and then to assess Makemie’s importance for the American church that would emerge from his efforts. At a time when Presbyterians in several American denominations are marking three hundred years of ministry and worship in the United States, consideration of Makemie’s life and ministry may add an appropriate measure of sobriety to celebrations that might otherwise overlook American Presbyterianism’s disquieting beginnings.

UNLIKELY HERO

Francis Makemie was born near Ramelton, Donegal County, in Northern Ireland of Scottish parents. The exact date is unclear since so few details of his childhood are known, but it was likely 1657 or 1658. If his birthday is unknown, Makemie’s ethnicity is unmistakable. He was Scotch-Irish, that is someone of Scottish descent living in Northern Ireland. This ethnic iden-

tity was important for two reasons. The first was the political situation of Great Britain in the seventeenth century and its influence upon Presbyterianism. The Stuart monarchy was committed to uniting the British isles as the United Kingdom, a commitment that involved bringing the Celtic fringe, that is, the Scots, the Irish and the Welsh under English rule. To that end the English established the Ulster colony in Northern Ireland and encouraged Scots, who in many cases were looking for better circumstances, to settle in the new territory. The second reason for noting Makemie’s ethnicity is that a majority of the American Presbyterian church’s original ministers and members were Scotch-Irish, thus accounting for important differences between the American church and other English-speaking Presbyterian communions.

Aside from his ethnic heritage, little is known about Makemie’s early life. He was one of four children—two brothers and one sister—and the only Makemie to leave Ireland. At the age of fifteen he attained to a sufficient understanding of the gospel to make profession of faith “through the pains of a godly schoolmaster, who used no small diligence in gaining tender souls to God’s service and fear.”¹ In 1676 he enrolled at the University of Glasgow where records described him as having blue-eyes and brown hair that covered “an intellectual forehead” and adorned “the dignified mien of a true Irish gentleman” (Barkley, 9). At university Makemie

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1. Makemie quoted in J. M. Barkley, *Francis Makemie of Ramelton: Father of American Presbyterianism* (Belfast: Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland, 1981) 9.

studied divinity and by 1680 was in regular communication with his home Presbytery of Laggan in order to be examined for ordination. Close supervision followed over the course of the next two years, with records of presbytery ending abruptly in 1681 during a time of persecution, only to be restored in 1690. Ordained either in 1681 or 1682, Makemie soon left for the New World with a commission to plant churches among Presbyterian settlers. In 1683 he arrived in Maryland only a year after William Penn had arrived to found the city of Philadelphia.

Because of the presence of Presbyterians in Philadelphia and the eventual founding of the first presbytery in that city, historical interest in the colonial church has generally slighted the ministry and congregations of Presbyterians in Maryland. Yet, the colony's policies of religious toleration, despite the Roman Catholic convictions of its founding proprietor, Lord Baltimore, made Maryland a place where Presbyterians were the majority of the population. In addition to Makemie's ministry there, William Trail and Thomas Wilson, both from the Presbytery of Laggan, along with Samuel Davis, whose background is unknown, were also responsible for planting churches in Maryland.

But Makemie traveled extensively beyond Maryland, ministering to Presbyterians in Pennsylvania, Virginia, Delaware, New Jersey, and even Barbados. He tried in 1684 to visit South Carolina but violent storms prevented him from completing the journey. In 1692 he spent time in Philadelphia and is generally credited with planting the seeds of the first congregation in that city, his sermons likely being the first Presbyterian witness in the Quaker town. Six years later he set sail for Barbados to preach among Presbyterians engaged in business enterprises in that colony. In addition to his travels for church planting and conducting worship, Makemie also embarked on trips to recruit Presbyterian ministers for the middle colonies. He visited London at least twice, once in 1689 and another time in 1704, hoping to find men looking for opportunities for ministry. Makemie also corresponded with such Boston Congregationalists as Increase Mather, Cotton Mather and Benjamin Colman in hope of securing additional ministerial support for Presbyterianism. Late in life, in 1707 Makemie undertook a trip to Boston for similar purposes but political circumstances (see below) intervened to prevent

a successful outcome. To conclude that Makemie was an itinerant evangelist and organizing administrator of American Presbyterianism is not far from the mark.

Another reason for Makemie's travels was his own business interests, which were crucial to his survival as a minister without the support of a settled congregation. Historians speculate that his relatively longer stay in Barbados from 1695 to 1698 owed to commercial dealings that required Makemie's presence on the island. Barbados was often a stop on voyages from Britain to the New World, so he may have established a sense of opportunities for trade even on his way to Maryland. One indication of Makemie's business acumen was a little pamphlet he wrote in 1705, *A Plain and Friendly Persuasive to the Inhabitants of Virginia and Maryland for Promoting Towns and Cohabitation*. The work was designed chiefly to counter a pattern of settlement and agricultural endeavor (especially tobacco farming) that spread the population out over large portions of land with few centers or towns to facilitate either commerce or cultural life. In some respects, Makemie could sound like an officer from the local Chamber of Commerce:

give all Encouragement to Traders and Strangers, especially to such as settle in Towns; lay no uneasie Burdens upon Trade, be the Forerunners and Patterns to your People, in complying with your own Laws; Let the poorer sort of Inhabitants be left to follow the Example of those of greater Ability.... Let all Gentlemen of Estates be expeditious in building Dwelling-houses, and Stores, both for Merchants Goods and Tobacco, that the Trading Part of England may not complain for want of Conveniences at your Towns.²

But Makemie had more in mind than profit or the consumption of goods. Towns he believed would diversify agricultural production and better conserve the land, they would be easier to defend against invasion, and they would make the New World more attractive to other settlers.

Makemie also had a religious motive to his commercial madness. He believed that towns and the business that sustained them would "advance Religion" because Christianity prospered best when its adherents lived in close proximity. He wrote:

... for in remote and scattered Settlements we can never enjoy so fully, frequently, and certainly, those Privileges and Opportunities as are to be had in all Christian Towns and Cities; for by reason of bad Weather,

2. Makemie, *A Plain and Friendly Persuasive to the Inhabitants of Virginia and Maryland for Promoting Towns and Cohabitation*, reprinted in Boyd S. Schlenker, ed., *The Life and Writings of Francis Makemie* (Philadelphia, Pa.: The Presbyterian Historical Society, 1971) 142.

or other Accidents, Ministers are prevented and People are hindered to attend, and so disappoint one another: But in Towns Congregations are never wanting, and Children and Servants never are without Opportunity of Hearing, who cannot travel many Miles to hear, and be catechized.... it is a melancholy Consideration, how many came very ignorant of Religion to the Plantations, and by removing to remote Settlements, have been neglected by others, and careless of themselves, continue grossly ignorant of many necessary parts of the Christian Religion; and many Natives born in ignorant Families, and by distance, seldom hear a Sermon, which would be more common, and frequently attended, if we had Towns and Cohabitation (Makemie, *A Plain and Friendly Persuasive*, 146–47).

Makemie's argument is not only interesting for what it implies about the state of society and civic life in colonial America, but demonstrated genuine insights about the dependence of healthy churches on strong communities.

In addition to his own economic activity, Makemie also likely received financial support from his father-in-law, William Anderson, a wealthy merchant and landowner in Maryland, whose daughter, Naomi, Makemie married sometime between 1687 and 1698. The earliest record of this marriage comes from Anderson's will which disclosed at the time of his death in 1698 that Makemie and Naomi Anderson had been wed. The Makemies had two daughters, Elizabeth and Anne, the former dying in 1708, the latter living until 1787, but neither bearing children. In addition to laboring as a Presbyterian itinerant, then, Makemie also supported himself and his family through commercial activity and functioned in a limited capacity as a civic leader.

Aside from his travels and business activities, three episodes in Makemie's life are important for understanding his influence upon American Presbyterianism and for grasping how fragile the Presbyterian communion was that he helped to start. The first was a dispute that occurred between Makemie and George Keith, who in England had been Presbyterian but had become a Quaker and in colonial America became a polemicist against non-Quakers. The controversy started after 1692, the year when Makemie's *Catechism* was published. Copies of the work have not survived but it was a compendium of the Westminster Standards to be used in training children in the Reformed faith. Keith took issue with the catechism for departing from Quaker teaching on any number of points and challenged Makemie to a public debate. The latter declined

because he did not want to allow "an ignorant and illiterate multitude" to be the judge of this important dispute.³ So Makemie challenged Keith to put his objections in print, which the Quaker did and were published with Makemie's rejoinder in 1694 as *Answer to George Keith's Libel*.

Makemie's answer is sketchy at many points, and somewhat haphazard since he was responding to another person. But it does reveal that the Presbyterianism of Makemie's era was following in the larger pattern of the Reformed faith handed down by the sixteenth-century Reformers. In addition to attacking Quaker beliefs about the inner light, the deity of Christ and the nature of the institutional church, Makemie also defended traditional Reformed teaching on the sufficiency of Scripture, Christ's ministry, the doctrines of grace, the office of ministers, and the sacraments. For instance, on the nature and extent of the atonement, Makemie asserted that "the most unanimous, and received Doctrine of the Reformed Churches, is, That whom Christ Died for, he absolutely and completely Redeemed; and that was some Select and Chosen Number, given him of God, the Father, to Lay down his life for them, as our Lord himself hints plainly to us in John 17. at large, of which says he, None was Lost."⁴ Likewise, on the specific instance of the three offices of Christ, Makemie also followed the chief contours of Reformed teaching. Keith had objected to Makemie's catechism for only mentioning the three offices of prophet, priest and king, and not using any number of metaphors used in Scripture to understand Christ's additional duties of mediation. But Makemie responded that these "Three Offices include, All that Christ did, and was Requisite to be done as Mediatour," and that these are very "Obvious and Plain" in Scripture (*Answer to George Keith's Libel*, 64). For good measure, the Presbyterian minister added that Keith must be "a Man of a Perverse Spirit, and contentious mind" to raise "a Debate upon this head" (66).

If Makemie's dispute with Keith showed the colonial Presbyterian church's doctrinal understanding to be in the mainstream of Reformed teaching, the second major episode in his career illustrates the importance of ecclesiology to the American church. Prior to 1701 Presbyterian ministers like Makemie and his colleagues preached somewhat indiscriminately depending on the circumstances. Sometimes they would minister in designated Presbyterian congregations but on other occasions they might preach in a Congregationalist or Anglican setting

3. Makemie quoted in Barkley, *Francis Makemie*, 14.

4. Makemie, *Answer to George Keith's Libel*, reprinted in Schlenker, ed., *Life and Writings*, 67.

to the local Presbyterians. In fact, Makemie regarded the different branches of Protestantism as having a wide degree of unity. While living in Barbados, for instance, he wrote a pamphlet, *Truths in a True Light*, to answer Roman Catholic criticisms of Protestantism that were designed to deepen the divisions between Anglicans and Presbyterians. Makemie argued that Presbyterians agreed with Anglicans “in all points of faith, and divine ordinances, or parts of worship, . . . differing only in ceremonies, government and discipline.”⁵ He then listed twelve points of agreement, from receiving the doctrinal component of the Thirty-Nine Articles, to strictly observing the Lord’s Day. The only substantial points of disagreement were the use of the *Book of Common Prayer*, the canons of the Church of England, episcopal government, and forms of church discipline.

But after 1701 affirmations of unity with Anglicans became harder to maintain because of the founding of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG). Although designed as a missionary agency of the Church of England for evangelistic work in non-Christian lands, in the North American colonies the SPG became a vehicle for establishing the Anglican communion by law. Or at least that was the perception of many, including American Presbyterians. It was also the experience of some, such as George McNish in New York, where the governor of the colony, Lord Cornbury, ejected McNish from his congregation and installed instead an SPG missionary.

When Makemie returned from London in 1704, he also laid plans for the formation of an American presbytery. Since the first pages of the presbytery’s minutes are missing, the record is not entirely clear whether the Presbytery of Philadelphia met in 1705 or 1706, though the supplementary evidence suggests that the latter date is the correct one. It is clear, though, that the presbyters elected Makemie the first moderator. The original presbytery consisted of eight men. Aside from Makemie, it included John Hampton (1679–1721), originally from Northern Ireland and a graduate of Edinburgh; George McNish (1684–1722), a Scot who studied at Glasgow; Samuel Daves (?–1725), a man about whom little is known; Nathaniel Taylor (?–1710) and John Wilson (?–1712), whose backgrounds are mysterious aside from their hailing from Scotland; Jedediah Andrews (1674–1747), a graduate of Harvard and the only New Englander in the original presbytery; and John Boyd (?–1708), another Scot also educated at Glasgow.

Church historians have long speculated about the

exact character of the first presbytery, with later generations often trying to justify their own Presbyterian predilections on the basis of the original American Presbyterian body. The issue has boiled down to one of authority. Did the presbytery function in a way that controlled the ministers and congregations within its bounds, or was it more like an association of Presbyterians who banded together for fellowship and mutual edification? The question is likely anachronistic since these debates would not become meaningful for another two decades in American Presbyterianism. Three factors were important in understanding the function of the Presbytery of Philadelphia. First, the American church was short on pastors and the presbytery became the means necessary to ordain men for the ministry. Indeed, the first business of the presbytery was to ordain John Boyd who was laboring in New Jersey. Second, American Presbyterians perceived a need to organize in response to a possible expansion of the Church of England. Although the presbytery lacked sanctions by the state and could wind up facing obstacles similar to those experienced by the Presbyterian Church in Northern Ireland where the Anglican establishment did forcibly suppress Presbyterianism, the formation of a judicatory would proactively establish a Presbyterian presence before Anglican encroachments. Third, the religious liberties provided by William Penn’s colony made Pennsylvania a place where Presbyterians could take advantage of religious disestablishment. Other colonies lacked both the religious freedoms and the conveniences afforded by Philadelphia.

The issue of religious liberty was important not only as a condition for the formation of the first presbytery but was also at the heart of the third major episode in Makemie’s life in America. Soon after the meeting of presbytery, John Hampton and Makemie traveled north with the intention of visiting Boston and recruiting more ministers for the Presbyterian church. On the way they preached in New Jersey and were planning to do so again in New York had they not run up against the obstinacy of Lord Cornbury, the governor of that colony. He was the English official responsible for actively encouraging the SPG in New York and New Jersey, and who disrupted the congregations of Presbyterians and Reformed throughout the region. To preach in New York, Makemie and Hampton petitioned the English government but were refused. The Presbyterians went ahead anyway and on January 19, 1707, Makemie preached in New York in the home of a church member “in as publick a manner as possible,”⁶ meaning the doors remained open. On the same day,

5. Makemie quoted in Barkley, *Francis Makemie*, 16.

6. Makemie, *A Narrative of a New and Unusual American*

Hampton preached in Newtown on Long Island. Later in the day when Makemie joined Hampton in Newtown, the sheriff of Queens County arrested both ministers and the next day they were imprisoned for having preached without a license. Makemie and Hampton remained in custody until March 8, 1707, but did attend the next meeting of presbytery on March 25. For unknown reasons the government dropped the charges against Hampton. Makemie, however, was scheduled for trial on June 3, 1707.

The case against Makemie rested on Cornbury's apparent misreading of instructions from Queen Ann that Anglican ministers be approved either by the Bishop of London or by the New York Governor himself before being permitted to preach in the colony. This provision did not seem to apply to dissenting ministers, such as Presbyterians and Congregationalists, for whom other laws applied. At least, that was Makemie's defense. In 1707 he wrote *A Narrative of a new and Unusual American Imprisonment of Two Presbyterian Ministers*, which included exchanges from the court proceedings and Makemie's account and defense of his actions. Here he appealed to the laws of Parliament that specified how dissenting ministers were to gain licenses to preach publicly. Because he had been licensed by English authorities in both Barbados and Virginia, Makemie believed he was free to preach in any of the English colonies, including New York and New Jersey. He appealed specifically to the policies of religious toleration implemented in 1689 by William and Mary and argued that they applied as much to the colonies as to England. "As to our doctrines," Makemie declared, "we have our Confession of Faith, which is known to the Christian World, and I challenge all the Clergy of York to show us any false or pernicious Doctrines therein; Yea, with those exceptions specified in the Law, we are able to make it appear, they are in all Doctrinal Articles of Faith agreeable to the Established Doctrines of the Church of England" (Schlenter, 201). Not only were the Presbyterians playing by the rules of the religious establishment, but Cornbury himself, according to Makemie, was applying those rules arbitrarily. "It will be unaccountable to England, to hear, that Jews, who openly blaspheme the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ, ... Quakers who disown the Fundamental Doctrines of the Church of England, and both Sacraments ..." are tolerated "and only we, who have complied and are still ready to comply with the Act of Toleration, and are nearest to, and the likest the Church of England of any Dissenters, should be hindered, and that only in the Government of New-York and Jersies" (202–203).

Some believe that Cornbury set the trial date so far

after the incident because he knew the charges were weak and hoped that Makemie, for whom travel to New York was a hardship, would agree never to preach again in New York and let the matter drop. But to the leading Presbyterian the legal status of his church and the calling of the minister were at stake and he went forward with the trial. That Makemie did so was no small endeavor on his part. As he told the judge and jury toward the conclusion of his trial, "I am a Stranger, who live four hundred miles from this place, and it is known to the whole Country, what intolerable trouble I have been put to already, and we cannot consent to a special Verdict, for that is only to encrease my trouble, multiply my Charge, and give me further delay ..." (Schlenter, 232). His arguments, along with those of his legal counselors, prevailed and the jury acquitted him of the charges. Though acquitted, Makemie was still forced to pay for all the costs of the court proceedings and his imprisonment, in addition to his own travel expenses. The injustice of these charges led the New York assembly to pass a law prohibiting the assessment of innocent parties for legal expenses in court proceedings.

A year after the trial Makemie died at the age of 50 and was buried on or near his farm in Virginia. The proximity of his death to his imprisonment and trial has tempted historians to link the end of the Presbyterian minister's life to his ill treatment by New York officials. The ordeal of the incident in New York may very well have been a factor in his death, though the spottiness of the records make such a determination impossible. Just as likely the standard of living in colonial America, combined with Makemie's many travels, contributed to his seemingly short life. Whatever the case, his will indicates that he was preparing for his death as early as April 27, 1708, perhaps an indication of poor health and an awareness of his impending demise. Though the exact date of his death is unknown, it likely occurred in late July of that year. It concluded a quarter of a century of ministry in the New World by a man whose doings and ideas are only slightly less murky than the church attributed to his efforts. Unlike the Founding Fathers of Massachusetts Bay Colony or the United States, American Presbyterianism's founder remains the American church's most obscure figure of prominence.

WITHOUT MAJESTY

Francis Makemie serves a useful purpose in American church history. Students of the past invariably look ide-

Imprisonment of Two Presbyterian Ministers, reprinted in Schlenter, ed., *Life and Writings*, 202.

alistically to history for examples of courage and fidelity. They also search for first causes or important events or people that shape subsequent developments. Although very little is known about most of the original American Presbyterian pastors, Makemie appears to have written more and have been more prominent economically than his ecclesiastical peers. He was also a bundle of energy during his time in the New World, preaching in isolated posts, traveling to New England and London to recruit new ministers, and helping to organize the handful of Presbyterians in the mid-Atlantic region into a formal presbytery. His status as Founding Father is by no means arbitrary. But neither is it entirely obvious given how little is known about the original Presbyterian ministers or their activities. Makemie is indeed the unlikely pastor whom historians have designated as the Presbyterian Founding Father because without his life and work the history of American Presbyterianism would be even harder to explain.

Without discrediting the significance of Makemie's life and ministry, his work is just as useful to American church history for reminding contemporary Presbyterians of two important historical points. The first concerns how humble the origins of Presbyterianism in the New World were. It is also a reminder of how badly Presbyterianism fared in the Old World as well. American Presbyterians tend to associate their tradition's origins with the heroism of a John Calvin in Geneva or a John Knox in Edinburgh. This is the lure of the magisterial Reformation, when Presbyterian and Reformed church fathers were important figures in their societies and when churches commanded the interests of statesmen. Such historical enticement might plausibly tempt American Presbyterians to regard the coming of their church to the New World as the extension of the Reformation's greatness. But the life and work of Makemie actually reveals a magisterial Reformation tradition without majesty. His ministry culminated almost 125 years not of Presbyterian conquest but of Presbyterian subsistence. That historical background makes Makemie's achievements all the more noteworthy. They are not, however, the culmination of the Reformed faith's expansion to North America after a successful campaign through the British Isles.

Presbyterianism did begin well in late sixteenth-century Scotland. In 1560 the Scottish parliament abolished the mass and renounced the jurisdiction of Rome. It also adopted the Scots Confession of 1560, which was a simple statement of Reformed convictions. John Knox, who was the acknowledged leader of Scottish Presbyterianism, put together a directory for public worship that in

1564 was available for the churches. By 1578 the Scottish Kirk also had a book of discipline, thus adding polity to the church's existing arsenal of creed and liturgy. Presbyterianism appeared to be off to a very good start.

But then the Kirk ran into the realities and ambitions of the British monarchy. James VI, the Scottish king, cooperated with Presbyterians even to the point of ratifying the National Covenant (1581) in which he promised to uphold the true (read: Reformed) faith within the kingdom. But when James succeeded Elizabeth I and became the monarch of both England and Scotland, now James I, Presbyterians in the north became pawns in a larger battle between the king's efforts to unite the British Isles and Parliament's defense of its own authority. Throughout the seventeenth century until 1690 Scottish Presbyterians entered into a variety of alliances, sometimes with Parliament, sometimes with English Puritans, and sometimes with Roman Catholic kings, in order to preserve the Reformed faith in Scotland. Arguably the most moving instance of heroism from the era is the experience of the Covenanters who refused to cooperate with Anglicanism, were forced to meet for worship in the fields, and whose ministers were sometimes imprisoned and executed. To be a Presbyterian in late seventeenth-century Scotland was by no means a simple or agreeable affair.

Presbyterianism in seventeenth-century Northern Ireland, Makemie's homeland, was no more pleasant than in Scotland and in some ways worse. The churches and ministers there suffered the same fallout from political struggles between crown and Parliament. From 1660, the time of the monarchy's restoration, to 1690, when laws recognized the rights of certain Protestant dissenters, the English government suppressed Presbyterianism in Northern Ireland in favor of the Anglican establishment. But even after the more tolerant policies of William and Mary for non-Anglicans, after 1690 Northern Irish Presbyterianism was a second-class faith. Under the Sacramental Test Act, for instance, marriages performed by Presbyterian ministers were considered invalid. This was, of course, the background for Makemie's preparation and planning for the ministry. For many Scots-Irish Presbyterians, the difficulties of the Old World combined with the prospects of the New provided sufficient incentive to leave familiar surroundings and venture into the uncertainties of the North American colonies.

The Presbyterians who did so turned out to have made a momentous decision for the history of Presbyterianism. In the New World, and especially in the mid-Atlantic colonies where religious diversity was not

merely tolerated but agreeable, Presbyterians established a beach head for their faith unlike anything experienced in Great Britain. Although Presbyterianism would become the established faith of Scotland, the state church system was inherently flawed because it involved the church in compromises imposed by government officials. Consequently, the Scottish Kirk repeatedly witnessed controversies and divisions, from the Seceders of the 1730s down to the Free Church of the 1840s, that stemmed from state officials intervening in the appointment of ministers and interfering with other aspects of church affairs. In Northern Ireland, as already mentioned, Presbyterianism was a dissenting church whose ministry was necessarily restricted thanks to the established Church of Ireland (Anglican). In the North American British colonies, however, Presbyterians discovered a measure of religious freedom that gave the church a remarkable degree of autonomy even before the American Revolution established the principle of freedom of conscience for all believers at the national level. Of course, as Makemie's experience in New York with Lord Cornbury revealed, American Presbyterians were not completely independent of government control or regulation. But in places like Maryland, Delaware and Pennsylvania Presbyterians neither had to endure the burdens that came with being the established church nor the affronts that stemmed from one's status as a religious dissenter. Even before the founding of the United States, America turned out to be a place where Presbyterianism could flourish.

Still, Presbyterian success was meager at first and Makemie's experience during twenty-five years of ministry illustrates that stark reality. The Methodists of the nineteenth century gained a reputation for itinerant preaching in hard scrabble conditions to ordinary and scattered folk. The same appears to have been true of Makemie whose mode of transportation would have been no better than the Methodist itinerants and who also added trans-Atlantic voyages to his travels, ventures that were by no means luxurious or safe. Makemie also labored for over two decades before the formation of a presbytery. Even then, the oversight and support that might come from the fraternity of presbyters would have been small owing to the difficult conditions that all the members of presbytery faced. Keep in mind as well that Makemie did not have support from a mother church in the Old World. Presbyterians in Northern Ireland were struggling to make their own way and the Kirk in Scotland, established six years after Makemie came to America, was only an adolescent when the Presbytery of Philadelphia was founded. In other words, Makemie

did not bring with him a board of publication, plans for a seminary, budgets for domestic or foreign missions, or recognition of the need for office space in downtown Philadelphia. At the beginning, American Presbyterianism was a mission work without a sending church. Thanks to the efforts of Makemie along with the other ministers of his generation, the seeds of the American church took root, though ripened Presbyterian fruit would not be ready for another century.

Makemie's ministry and experience is also instructive for a second historical consideration, one that has repeatedly surfaced throughout the history of American Presbyterianism. A perennial debate among historians of the American church is whether its roots are Scotch-Irish Presbyterian or New England Puritan. Here the term Puritan includes those members of the Church of England who desired further reformation of the Anglican establishment and believed that presbyterian church government was part of that purification project. The two classic nineteenth-century statements of this debate came from Charles Hodge in his two volumes on *The Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (1839–1840), and Charles Briggs in his work, *American Presbyterianism: Its Origin and Early History* (1885). Already in the late 1830s a controversy over the ethnic origins of American Presbyterianism animated Hodge to write that the Presbyterian immigrants from Ireland “could not have been less than fifty thousand, and probably were far more numerous.” Annoyed by the idea that the English were somehow responsible for the American church, Hodge continued with sarcasm:

Yet the whole Presbyterian Church owes its existence to the more overflowings of New England! It would be much nearer the truth to say, that presbyterians have been the basis of several other denominations. Half the population of the country would now be presbyterian, had the descendants of presbyterians, in all cases, adhered to the faith of their fathers.⁷

Writing almost fifty years later, Briggs was unpersuaded by Hodge's data. “The dominant influence at the close of the seventeenth century in the Middle colonies and in South Carolina,” Briggs wrote, “was Puritan and English—but the Scotch and Irish and Welsh were everywhere welcomed into Christian fellowship and communion.” To account for the influence of the

7. Hodge, *The Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: William S. Martien, 1839) 70.

several Scottish and Scotch-Irish pastors that comprised the first presbytery, Briggs adds, “The English Puritan churches were glad to settle Scotch and Irish pastors over them, and there was no friction.”⁸ By the twentieth century this argument over origins was settled in Briggs’ favor. The best and most comprehensive study of the colonial church (though flawed), Leonard J. Trinterud’s *The Forming of an American Tradition* (1949), concedes that the American church stemmed from English Puritanism and Scottish Presbyterianism. But he qualifies this admission by adding that the New England contribution was so “significant a part of American Presbyterianism” that Puritan ministers in New York and New Jersey receive credit for the first signs of Presbyterianism in the New world.⁹ To attribute a Scotch-Irish character to the American church’s founding because of a majority of ministers at the first presbytery is, in Trinterud’s view, a “fallacious line of reasoning” (Trinterud, 31).

To be fair, Trinterud does hedge at another point and writes that Presbyterianism in America “would emerge as something differing from all its sources,” whether New or Old World. This is close to being an obvious point since Presbyterianism was not Congregationalist like New England, and no matter how different the original presbytery was from Edinburgh or Geneva, it was by no means a southern association of Puritan ministers. This is another way of saying that without the Scotch-Irish presence led by Makemie, American Presbyterianism would have had to wait for another group of Presbyterians or Reformed believers and pastors. To be sure, the American church was no mere copy of Presbyterianism in Scotland or Ireland, partly because of the mix of Scottish, Irish and New England pastors in the first presbytery, and partly because the Old World churches were in no condition to provide a model for a new church. But to suggest that American Presbyterianism owed its initial character to New England is to slight considerably the experience of Makemie and his Irish colleagues in Maryland, Virginia and Delaware.

Nevertheless, the question of whether the American church’s origins were Puritan or Scotch-Irish Presbyterian is irrelevant. Unlike the Covenanters or the Associate Reformed Presbyterians who came to America with direct ties to churches in the Old World and looked to replicate the characteristics of their communions, the American church founded by Makemie, which would

become the mainline denomination known as the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., was a complete novelty. It arose without planning or direct appeal to historic precedents. To say that the founding generation of America made it up as they went along is certainly too strong. But it does suggest the originality of the body that Makemie formed. It also points to the humble origins of American Presbyterianism since Makemie and his colleagues had to make their own way. They could not rely on the care and oversight of other established churches.

CONCLUSION

Because the American Presbyterian church would provide substantial moral and sometimes physical support to the American Revolution, the tendency among historians of colonial Presbyterianism has been to turn Makemie into an icon of religious liberty and the sort of principled stand that led the Founding Fathers of the United States to throw off the yoke of Great Britain. Certainly, Makemie’s encounter with Lord Cornbury lends itself to this narrative of New World freedom from Old World tyranny. In the words of a twentieth-century Irish Presbyterian, J. M. Barkley, Makemie was “not only the Father of American Presbyterianism” but also one of the Fathers of Religious liberty” in the United States. Barkley adds, “in Makemie’s day the Declaration of Independence lay in the future, but by his organizing of the first Presbytery and his stand for religious toleration, he helped to sow the seeds and plough the soil out of which it grew” (Barkley, *Francis Makemie*, 21, 22).

This angle may be correct in certain respects but it misses the importance of Makemie and his ministry. The Founding Father of American Presbyterianism is a constant reminder of the humble origins of the American church. It did not arrive with fanfare or a groundswell of support. American Presbyterianism was a struggle from the beginning, and it had almost no help from Scotland, the home of Presbyterianism, or from Northern Ireland, because the beginnings of the Presbyterian churches there were almost as modest as those in the New World. Makemie is a reminder then that there is no golden age in Presbyterian history. Even more important, the dire conditions he faced and the difficulties that attended the founding of an American Presbyterian church teach yet one more lesson that the church’s experience this side of glory will be plagued by hardship, toil, and discouragement. This is why it is called the church militant. ■

8. Briggs, *American Presbyterianism: Its Origin and Early History* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1885) 131.

9. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949) 15.