

CHAPTER III

*Not as extensive or intensive
as the other chapters.
Not needed!!*

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The history of the Presbyterian Church in Colonial America is the remarkable story of how the Church grew, from the day of small things, to become a truly national Presbyterian Church. By the end of the colonial era the Presbyterian Church had become a national church in more than one sense. First, apart from New England the Church was scattered throughout the entire country. Moreover, she had a national organization under the auspices and authority of the Synod soon to become a national General Assembly overseeing several Synods. Furthermore, as the Church was located in a new nation that she had helped to bring to birth, she was soon to become the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. In addition, during the colonial period the Church had transcended her historic and ethnic origins in Europe to become a uniquely American Presbyterian Church. Finally, the Church had become national in the sense that, for better or for worse, she was closely associated with this new American nation; if not politically, certainly culturally and psychologically, as far as the future destiny of country and church was concerned.

The current chapter charts the course of the Church in the early national period from the 1780's to the 1830's. In treating this period, we describe the Constitution of the General Assembly, the Church's ministry and polity, her mission and participation in the so-called Evangelical United Front, the gathering storm clouds of church controversy, and the resulting Old School--New School Controversy. This history is an integral part of the PCA's historical background since she traces her historical roots back through the Southern, and to some extent Northern, Presbyterian Church to the Church of this early national period. How did the

Presbyterian Church respond to the challenge of being a new national church in a changing country and culture?

CONSTITUTION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

When Presbyterians gathered to give thanks for peace in 1783, they not only looked to the recent past with praise for God's remarkable providence, but to the imminent future with eschatological enthusiasm and optimism. Pastor George Duffield in Philadelphia linked the future of the United States with that of Christ's kingdom in terms of 'our American Zion': 'Here has our God erected a banner of civil and religious liberty: And prepared an asylum for the poor and oppressed from every part of the earth.' Here in America political liberty would set the stage for social equality and economic prosperity. Here the sons of science would enlighten the whole world with knowledge. Here the pure religion of Jesus, as opposed to formal follies and denominational distinctions, would reign, overcoming vice and immorality and promoting love to God and benevolence to man. Here Jesus would go forth conquering and to conquer, and from here His gospel would go forth till the heathen were his inheritance and Israel restored. Here would the ancient promises of grace and glory be fulfilled till all the nations had become the Lord's kingdom and piety and peace reigned upon earth (JPH 52, 458f)

This spirit of optimism and enthusiasm flowed from an historical as well as an eschatological inspiration. For example, John Witherspoon, perhaps reflecting the Scottish skepticism of millennialism at the Westminster Assembly, based his optimism more on history long-term history than on short-term eschatology. Given God's grace human depravity did not necessarily preclude human progress at least in a relative sense.