

The Presbyterian Experience in the United States

A Sourcebook

Edited by
William Yoo

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Contents

List of Illustrations	ix
Introduction	1
1. Contestations over Confessional Subscription	5
JONATHAN DICKINSON “A Sermon Preached at the Opening of the Synod at Philadelphia,” 1722	5
JOHN THOMSON <i>An Overture Presented to the Reverend Synod of Dissenting Ministers</i> , 1729	9
SYNOD OF PHILADELPHIA Adopting Act, 1729	12
2. Revivals, Dissensions, and the First Great Awakening	15
GILBERT TENNENT “The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry,” 1740	15
JOHN CALDWELL “An Impartial Trial of the Spirit Operating in this Part of the World,” 1741	18
SAMUEL BLAIR <i>A Short and Faithful Narrative of a Remarkable Revival of Religion in the Congregation of New-Londonderry and Other Parts of Pennsylvania</i> , 1744	21
3. The Reformed Shape of Presbyterian Worship	25
DAVID MCGREGORE “The True Believer’s All Secured,” 1747	25
JONATHAN PARSONS “Infant Baptism from Heaven,” 1765	28
JOHN BLACK “The Duty of Christians, in Singing the Praise of God, Explained,” 1790	33

HARRIET MYER LAIRD	“Self-Dedication; or Solemn Covenant with God,” 1822	37
4.	Distinctive Elements of Presbyterianism: Polity, Proclamation, and Predestination	41
SAMUEL BUELL	A Sermon Preached at the Ordination of Samson Occom, 1759	41
SAMUEL OCCOM	“A Sermon at the Execution of Moses Paul, an Indian,” 1772	44
SAMUEL MILLER	<i>An Essay on the Warrant, Nature, and Duties of the Office of the Ruling Elder, in the Presbyterian Church</i> , 1831	47
JAMES HENLEY THORNWELL	<i>A Tract on the Doctrines of Election and Reprobation</i> , 1840	51
5.	The Problem of Slavery, the Division of the Church, and the Civil War	59
THEODORE S. WRIGHT	A Speech to the New York State Anti-Slavery Society, 1837	59
ALBERT BARNES	<i>An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery</i> , 1846	62
GEORGE D. ARMSTRONG	<i>The Christian Doctrine of Slavery</i> , 1857	67
CHARLES HODGE	“The General Assembly,” 1865	72
6.	The Rising Tides and Crashing Waves of Theological Controversy	77
ROBERT LEWIS DABNEY	“The Public Preaching of Women,” 1879	77
LOUISA M. WOOSLEY	<i>Shall Woman Preach? Or the Question Answered</i> , 1891	84
ARCHIBALD A. HODGE AND BENJAMIN B. WARFIELD	“Inspiration,” 1881	89
CHARLES AUGUSTUS BRIGGS	“The Authority of Holy Scripture,” 1891	95
7.	Emerging Understandings of Mission and Ministry at the Turn of the Twentieth Century	101
JOHN HENRY BARROWS	An Address at the World’s Parliament of Religions, 1893	101
LUCY CRAFT LANEY	“The Burden of the Educated Colored Woman,” 1899	104
ARTHUR JUDSON BROWN	<i>The Foreign Missionary: An Incarnation of a World Movement</i> , 1907	109
CHARLES STELZLE	<i>The Call of the New Day to the Old Church</i> , 1915	114

J. GRESHAM MACHEN	“Liberalism or Christianity?,” 1922	118
8. Denominational Reunions, Divisions, and Differing Ecclesial Emphases		123
“In Unity—For Mission: A Message to All Congregations from the Uniting General Assembly of The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America,”	1958	123
“A Message to All Churches of Jesus Christ throughout the World from the General Assembly of the National Presbyterian Church,”	1973	131
EUGENE CARSON BLAKE AND MARTIN NIEMÖLLER	“The Open Door,” 1965	135
TIMOTHY KELLER	<i>The Centrality of the Gospel</i> , 2000	141
9. Increasing Racial, Ethnic, and Global Diversities in Church Leadership		155
JORGE LARA-BRAUD	“Hispanic-Americans and the Crisis in the Nation,” 1969	155
GAYRAUD S. WILMORE	“Blackness as Sign and Assignment,” 1977	162
CHOI, MOON YOUNG	“From the Kitchen to the Pulpit: A Korean Woman Pastor’s Journey,” 2006	168
FAHED ABU-AKEL	“A Global Presbyterian Witness for a Global World Community,” 2006	173
Index		179

Introduction

In 1872, Charles Hodge completed his *Systematic Theology* after nearly fifty years of teaching at Princeton Theological Seminary. At this point in his storied career, the venerable Presbyterian scholar had taught over three thousand students; preached in countless churches; contributed a plethora of writings on religion, politics, and denominational affairs; and served as Moderator of the General Assembly. But he had yet to collect all his articles, insights, lectures, and notes into one comprehensive account. Hodge delayed this endeavor in part because some of his seminary colleagues worried that its publication would reduce the school's enrollment. They surmised prospective students might not come to study under Hodge if they could simply read the distillation of his theological instruction in a tome. Hodge ended up writing over two thousand pages across three volumes. The volumes sold for three dollars apiece, and eager readers purchased more than two thousand copies within the first two years of its printing, which was considered a significant achievement for an academic work covering dense topics like supralapsarianism and soteriology. Proponents and critics of Hodge alike benefited from the publication of *Systematic Theology* because it gave them an opportunity to receive or refute his ideas as they proliferated beyond the walls of the professor's classroom into the world.

In compiling thirty-five documents from the colonial period to the twenty-first century, this sourcebook similarly invites readers to better understand what it has meant to be Presbyterian in the United States. According to Charles Hodge, the task of the theologian is to interpret the facts of the Bible using the inductive method of science with reliance on the inward call of the Holy Spirit. The task of the historian is to comb through a seemingly

inexhaustible trove of historical sources to find the documents that most clearly and vividly represent important developments and viewpoints. Presbyterians in the United States have been criticized, fairly and unfairly, on a number of fronts, ranging from accusations of practicing insufficient religious piety to prioritizing conformity to middle-class American values at the expense of faithful witness. But one thing Presbyterians have never been charged with is writing too little about their experiences. Thus this sourcebook does not aspire to detail an exhaustive account of every moment in Presbyterian history, but rather it provides a representative account with a rich array of documents—such as sermons, theological treatises, constitutional records, private letters, and ecumenical conversations—that capture the internal dynamics, increasing diversity, and external influence of American Presbyterianism. It presents Presbyterians in their own words, telling the story of how a tradition progressed from its modest origins as an immigrant church to national institutions with international reach.

The documentary history also reveals the complexity of the Presbyterian experience in relation to American culture. Readers will observe firsthand the prophetic witness of Presbyterians who reformed social injustices and pursued racial reconciliation as well as the moral failings of others who defended slavery and attacked their fellow Presbyterian opponents with belligerent vitriol. Because the last book of this kind, *The Presbyterian Enterprise: Sources of American Presbyterian History*, was published in 1956, this volume accounts for the last sixty years of American Presbyterianism and revises the past historical record to shine light on essential yet previously overlooked developments in women's leadership, interreligious dialogue, racial-ethnic diversity, and transnational peacemaking. It is also intentional about the inclusion of women and Presbyterians of color alongside the more recognized writings of white men like Charles Augustus Briggs and Robert Lewis Dabney.

One of the best ways, if not the best way, to study history is through the immediacy of primary sources. Even the finest secondary interpretations of Presbyterian history cannot replicate the vibrant effect of reading the convictions of pioneers like Lucy Craft Laney and Charles Stelzle or studying the words of pastors like Louisa M. Woosley and Jonathan Dickinson. The structure of this book is therefore chronological and thematic. It moves across time, and each chapter covers different features and formative experiences that have created the many streams of Presbyterianism then and now. The first three chapters examine confessionalism, revivalism, and the Reformed shape of Presbyterian worship during the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. The next three chapters treat distinctive elements of Presbyterian polity and theology in the eighteenth century and nineteenth century, contestations over slavery and the Civil War, and theological

controversies over women in ministry and the doctrine of Scripture in the late nineteenth century. The final three chapters explore the following subjects from the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century: emerging understandings of mission and ministry; denominational reunions, divisions, and differing ecclesial emphases; and increasing racial, ethnic, and global diversities in church leadership. Because of the unfolding nature of recent developments on human sexuality—and the ready availability of numerous works from Presbyterians on the matter in print and online—they are not included within the pages of this book. I am hopeful the next documentary history will incorporate the robust and generative theological reflections that continue to arise from prayerful Presbyterian communities seeking divine wisdom and direction concerning sexuality and gender identity.

The Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. produced a brief pamphlet for congregational Sunday school instruction in 1908 titled “Ten Reasons for Being a Presbyterian,” which included many of the topics plainly covered in this book, such as a high view of the Scriptures, a republican form of church governance, and the right administration of the sacraments. But this book also provides much-needed nuance and depth to one of the ten reasons: to enact and embody Christ’s call for unity through the Presbyterian Church. The documents reflect both the shared commitments and contrasting interpretations of Presbyterians on a host of beliefs and practices. In doing so, this volume takes readers on a journey through the past, to see what unites and divides Presbyterians in the United States.

Contestations over Confessional Subscription

JONATHAN DICKINSON

**“A Sermon Preached at the Opening
of the Synod at Philadelphia,” 1722**

Jonathan Dickinson (1688–1747) was born in Massachusetts, graduated from Yale College in 1706, and ordained in 1709. Like many influential theologians in the eighteenth century, he did much of his writing while serving as the pastor of a local congregation. After a long career as a pastor in Elizabethtown (now Elizabeth), New Jersey, he was elected the first president of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University), and the school’s first classes took place in his home in 1747. Among his early publications is this sermon, in which Dickinson, as moderator of the Synod of Philadelphia, began the meeting with a strong argument that Presbyterians must adhere to the sole authority of the Holy Scriptures in the making of church polity. Dickinson also opposed clerical subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith on the grounds that it violated the Christian conscience.

IT’s a bold invasion of Christ’s Royal Power, and a rude reflection upon his Wisdom and Faithfulness, for proud Worms to make any Addition to that perfect Pattern, which he has given us: For how artfully soever this Mischief may be painted over, with the fair Colours of Apostolick Tradition, Antiquity, Order and Decency, The band of Union and Communion, The well Government or greater Good of the Church, or whatever other Pretence; it may be justly challenged with a WHO HAS REQUIRED THIS AT YOUR

HANDS. Since he who is faithful to him that appointed him, as Moses was in all his House, has given us a compleat Rule for Doctrine, Worship and Discipline, sufficient to make the Man of God perfect, throughly furnished to all good Works.

. . . THAT the Holy Scriptures are every way sufficient, to make the Man of GOD perfect in, and throughly furnish him for, the whole Work of his Ministry. — For the illustrating this Proposition, let us take a short view of the Man of GOD, in the discharge of the several Duties of his Function, and we shall find full and compleat Furniture from this Sacred Treasury, for every part thereof.

IF we consider him as a Teacher and Instructor of poor ignorant Souls, in the way to the Kingdom of God. Labouring to store their dark Understandings with the knowledge of the Doctrines and Practice of Christianity, and to unfold the Mysteries of Salvation. The Scripture is profitable for Instruction. 2 Tim. III. 16. Thence may he bring to the Sinners view, his fallen State and native Misery, with the blessed Remedy provided, and glorious Salvation exhibited. Thence may he shew the Sinner the dreadful Perils of Impenitency, and his last Necessity of accepting offered Mercy. Thence may he mark out the path of Life, and discover the many Precipices, Errors and Mistakes, to which the poor Pilgrim is exposed in his way to Heaven. In a Word, Thence may he be furnish'd with whatever is necessary for Faith or Practice, and out of these Treasures may he bring forth things new and old. There is nothing Needful, nothing Lawful to be added. But if an Angel from Heaven preach any other Doctrine, let him be accursed. Gal. I. 8.

. . . AND now I come to the main thing intended, to make some Improvement of this Proposition.

WE are hence instructed, that the Man of GOD has no Power or Authority to make any New Laws or Constitutions in the Affairs of God's House; or to make any Additions unto, or Alterations of those Laws, that Christ has left us in the Divine Oracles. This being an Affair that has caused much Struggle and Debate; and that has been (as I observed before) throughout all succeeding ages of the Church, the source of innumerable Mischiefs and Confusions. I shall take liberty to be something particular upon this head, and consider what it is to make New Laws; and as I pass along, disprove our Claim to that Authority.

THEN the devising and imposing any PART or MODE of Worship that wants a Divine Institution, is a Legislature that we have no just claim to. — There are indeed several circumstantial Appendages to the Worship of God, such as Time, Place, &c. that are not, nor is it possible they should be, particularly provided for in the Word of God. Wisdom is therefore profitable

to direct, and determine these things, conformable to those general Rules, that require all things to be done to Edification, Decently and in Order.

BUT then to Institute any new PART of Worship, or to bring any thing into God[']s immediate Service, not expressly instituted by Christ, is a bold Invasion of his Royalty, who is Head over all things to his Church; Eph. I. 22; and whose Prerogative it is, to give Laws and Ordinances to his House. And no pretence of Innocency, Indifferency, or the like, will legitimate our thus setting our Thresholds by God[']s Thresholds, and our Posts by his Posts. Ezek. XLIII. 8. What more Innocent, what more Indifferent, than the cleanly Ceremony of washing Hands before Meat? Yet when Religion comes to be placed in it, and it's made a Decree of the Sanhedrin, God[']s Commandment is transgressed by this Tradition. Mat. XV. 3.

. . . THE forming and imposing any New Acts or Constitutions, in the Government or Discipline of the Church, I take to be an unwarrantable Legislature.—That I may clear this something particularly, I shall premise. . . .

1. THAT Christ has appointed a Government or Discipline in his Church. Christ has not left his Church to be a Garden without Enclosure, a City without Walls, or a Vineyard without a Hedge; nor has he left his Disciples to be Lambs in a large place, an ungovern'd Mobile; that (as when there was no King in Israel) every one should do what is good in his own eyes, take his swing in sinful and licentious Courses; to the scandal of Religion, profanation of sacred Ordinances, and destruction of his own Soul. — But that Offenders may be reduced, rotten Members cut off, Scandal restrain'd, and the Church edified; Christ has constituted an Ecclesiastical Regiment, and for that end appointed his own proper Officers, Laws, Ordinances, and Censures. The Necessity of which is manifest, from the Constitution of the Church, which consists of barren, and fruitful Branches; of Sound and Unsound; Tares and Wheat; Sheep and Goats; and must therefore quickly become a Babel, if without Discipline. The truth of which is also abundantly evident from many places of Scripture, particularly from Mat. XVIII. from 15 to 20 Verse, Tit. III. 10. and I. 13, 2 Cor. II. 6, I Tim. V. 20. cum multis aliis.

I don't now design a Dispute upon the controverted Modes of Church Government; but will venture to say with due deference and respect to those otherwise minded, that the Presbyterian Government appears to me the most conformed to the Laws of Christ, of any whatsoever; and does, for ought I know, as exactly quadrate with the Rule, as may be hoped for in this state of Imperfection.

But I go on to premise,

2. THAT there are some External Circumstances of Discipline, that are not set down precisely, or expressly provided for in the Word of God; but are

left to the prudent Conduct of Church Governours. To exemplify this, we in these Parts manage the Discipline of the Church in Sessions, Presbyteries, and Synods; and have doubtless the Divine Warrant for our so doing. In order to this, there must be Time and Place appointed for such Conventions, and some Order and Method for carrying on our Consultations decently, and without Confusion: And in this case there being only general Rules left us in the Scripture, it necessarily belongs to us to consult and agree upon such Methods, as may best subserve the great Ends of Discipline, the Glory of God, and the Churches Weal. — The Synod at Jerusalem mention'd Acts XV. does indeed give us considerable Light, even in this case; but leaves many necessary Circumstances to be provided for, by Humane Wisdom and Prudence. . . .

IT may be objected, How can Ministers be said to represent Christ, to preach in his Name, and by his Authority; and yet their Hearers not be obliged to receive their Doctrine; but at liberty to follow their several Sentiments, and (oftentimes) erring and misguided Consciences? But the Answer is easy.

THE Ministers of Christ do come to us in his Name, and by his Authority, when they preach nothing but what is contain'd in his Word, and we are under indispensable Obligation to receive the manifest Truths of God by them preached, not as the Word of Man, but as (it is in truth) the Word of God. I Thes. II. 13. But they have no Commission to teach us to observe any thing, but what Christ has commanded them. See Mat. XXVIII. 20. And when they teach any other Doctrine, they come in their own Names, and not in Christ[']s. — So then, we are to esteem them as Christ[']s Ambassadors, and with awful Reverence to attend their preaching, as if Christ was speaking to us by them, when we are convinced that they declare the Counsel of God: But are not bound to an implicate Faith, against contrary Convictions. It concerns them therefore, to justify their Interpretations of God[']s Word, by clear Scripture Evidence, to the Conviction of their Hearers; and thereby lay 'em under Obligations to Observance and Obedience. . . .

But to make this Case, if possible, a little plainer:

THOUGH some plain and comprehensive Creed or Confession of Faith (for distinguishing such as receive, from those who reject the Faith once delivered to the Saints) may be useful and necessary, since the worst of Heresies may take shelter under the express Words of Scripture. Yet we are by no means to force these credenda, upon any of differing Sentiments.

Source: Jonathan Dickinson, "A Sermon Preached at the Opening of the Synod at Philadelphia, September 19, 1722, Whererein [sic] is Considered the Character of the Man of God, and his Furniture for the Exercise both of Doctrine and Discipline,

with the True Boundaries of the Churches Power” (Boston: T. Fleet, 1723), 2, 8–9, 11–15, 20–22.

JOHN THOMSON

An Overture Presented to the Reverend Synod of Dissenting Ministers, 1729

John Thomson (ca. 1690–1753) emigrated from Ireland to colonial North America in 1715. After his ordination in Delaware in 1717, he emerged as an influential minister as the fledgling Presbyterian Church wrestled over matters of theology and polity. He was elected moderator of the New Castle Presbytery three times and moderator of the Synod of Philadelphia twice from 1718 to 1730. In 1724, the New Castle Presbytery required all of its ministerial candidates for ordination to confessional subscription with the following words: “I do own the Westminster Confession as the Confession of my faith.” Thomson advocated for the implementation of confessional subscription for all Presbyterian clergy in colonial North America. The following overture to the synod, initially introduced by the New Castle Presbytery in 1727 and then published by Thomson with a new preface in 1729, articulates how subscription would guide Presbyterians in their pursuit to create an ordered, organized, and unified Church in their new North American context.

Let us then consider our present Condition as we are a Church. As it is observed in the Overture, we are an intire Church of our selves, so as not to be a Part of any particular Church in the World, with which we are joyned as a Part. Now every Collection of People which are united together unto a Politick Body, whether Ecclesiastical or Civil, must have some Bond of Union, by which the several Parts are joyned together, to make or constitute them one intire Whole; as Kingdoms and Commonwealths are joyned, linked together by the same Government, Laws and Privileges, &c. Churches by the same Faith, Worship and Government: Now, until we fulfil the Intent of the following Overture, I am at a Loss where to find any sufficient External Bond of Union, by which we are united, and by Virtue of which we may be properly denominated one Church, as particular Churches are so denominated, either in Scripture or in the common Way of speaking; seeing that we, as a Church, have never yet so much as agreed, either about our Principles of Faith, Worship, or Form of Government.

If it be said first, That we all own the Westminster Confession . . .

2dly, If it be said, That we all take the Scripture for our Rule, and so are

United thereby. I answer, we are thereby no more united together as one particular Church, than to all other Christian Churches in the World; for they all own the Scriptures for their Rule . . . I answer, it's true the Scripture or written Word of God, is the only Rule and infallible Foundation of our Faith and Practice; but whether is it the bare Letter, or the Letter together with its true and proper Sense and Meaning, intended by the Holy Ghost, which is this Rule? Surely the latter. Now how is it possible for us to know concerning one another, or others to know concerning us, in what Sense we take or understand the Scriptures, or believe them as a Church, unless we joyn together to declare in what Sense we understand them; which I cannot see how it can be possibly done, but by agreeing upon a common Confession of our Faith, in some Form or other. . . .

Another Objection, made against subscribing the Confession, strikes in general against all subscribing of any Thing of that Kind; the Force thereof (that I may give it all the Advantage that I can) may be conceived to run thus; For a Synod to oblige their Members to subscribe the confession, is an imposing upon Men[']s Consciences, Things that are of a humane and not of divine Authority; which is Tyranny and Persecution, for which we justly blame the Church of Rome; Why then should we, or how can we be justified, while we are guilty of an Evil of the same Nature? How can a Person warrantably subscribe any Thing as containing the Articles of their Faith, but the Word of God, without being guilty of idolizing or too much exalting of Men[']s Works or Words? However specious this Objection may seem to be at the first Glance, to such as have not duly considered it; yet I dare say it will plainly appear to be not only salacious and sophistical, but in part nonsensical and trifling, if the following Answers be duly considered.

Answ. For a Church to oblige their Members to receive, embrace, acknowledge, subscribe, or practice any thing that is not founded upon the Word of God, is indeed Tyranny and Persecution; but to impose what Christ in and by his Word hath already imposed, is their indispensable Duty; and therefore if the Confession, &c. be according to the Word of God, (as I will venture to say it is, until the Contrary be made appear) it is our Duty to impose or require the Acknowledg[m]ent of it, or what is contained therein in other Words.

If it be urged, That the Confession is a humane Composure, and therefore, tho' sound, yet not of divine Authority, and therefore ought not to be imposed.

I answer, the Matter is of divine Authority, being contained in the Word of God, and the Words, tho' composed by fallible Men, being agreeable to the divine Matter, tho' falling short of that Perfection that the Scripture justly claims, must of Necessity have the divine Approbation; and so far as they are

agreeable to the infallible Word, are themselves infallible, as to the Truth contained in them, tho' as hath been acknowledged, they fall short of scriptural Perfection, as to manner of Expression; for whatsoever is agreeable to an infallible Rule, in so far is itself infallible.

And further, if Persons would but consider the Nature of a Confession, truly and properly so called, they might see that the very intrinsick Nature of the Thing requires that it should be expressed in our own, tho' imperfect Words, (viz. Words that are our own by Acknowledgment and Assumption, tho' we did not compose them, as a Person who can neither write nor indite makes the Words, composed by his Clerk or Scribe, his own, by setting his Name or Mark to them, tho' he composed none of them) [t]his will appear evident, if we consider First, that when we exhibit, acknowledge, or subscribe a Confession of our Faith; we thereby acknowledge such a Confession to be our Act and Deed, viz. our Confession of our Faith, or our own Declaration of our Sentiments, and Belief in Matters of Religion; and therefore, both Words and Sense must be our own, at least by Assumption; whereas the Scripture, as such, is God's Act and Deed, viz. his Declaration of his Mind to us, and thereby prescribing a Rule for our Faith and Practice; and therefore the Scripture as such, cannot possibly be the Confession of our Faith, in a true and proper Sense. Our Confession is a Manifestation of our Thoughts; but the Scripture is the Declaration of God's Thoughts; our Faith and Knowledge is but dark and imperfect, and therefore our Confession may be so too; but the Scripture is every way perfect, being a divine infallible Declaration of his Thoughts who is Perfection itself. The Scripture is the divine Rule, but our Faith and Confession too is the Thing ruled; from all which it may appear, that it's but a trifling Sophistication, to alledge that Christians should own or subscribe the Scriptures, and nothing else as their Confession of Faith, which they neither are or can be in a proper Sense. . . .

And how nonsensical (as I may say) is it for any to make this Evasion, that they are willing to subscribe the Scriptures; the Spirit of God (so to speak with reverence) hath already sufficiently subscribed them by the many Marks and Characters of the Author's Image instamp'd upon them; and therefore for us to talk of subscribing them in any otherwise than thereby to testify that we believe them to be divine, is I think (to say no worse) to cast a great Affront upon the Scriptures and their Author too: For to subscribe an Instrument is to own it by writing as our Act and Deed, in which Sense we are to understand the subscribing Confessions; and in this Sense it would be oft blasphemous Presumption to pretend to subscribe the Scriptures; and for such to say, that they only intend or mean that they are willing to subscribe the Scriptures as a Witness, viz. by writing to bear Witness that they acknowledge

the Scriptures to be the Word of God; in so saying they only trifle. For First, if they acknowledge such or such a Confession to be sound and orthodox, they can have no shadow of a Scruple to subscribe it in that Sense, that is, by subscribing to declare, that they believe such a Confession to be found according to the Word of God. But however, the Act of subscribing a Confession doth necessarily presuppose, that the Subscriber believes the Contents of such a Confession to be true; yet the true and proper Meaning, and Design of the Act itself, is thereby to assume or (if I may so express it) adopt such a Confession to be our own Act and Deed, (i.e.) our Confession of our Faith, as if at the Beginning of the Confession, or at the Beginning of every Article we had written, the Word Credo, I believe, and our Name at the End of all is to signify who or what Person this (1) is, who says he believes so and so. Now, altho' every Christian will readily acknowledge, that he believes the Scriptures to be true, to be the Word of God, &c. yet who ever dreamt of subscribing the Scriptures as their Act and Deed, or a Declaration of their Acts of Faith or Believing, altho' indeed, as is before noted, they contain the Object of our Faith, viz. the Truths believed, and that not as believed by us, but as revealed by God; whereas our Confessions, tho' they contain the same Truth, yet they express them not immediately as revealed by God to us, but as understood, received and believed by us.

Source: John Thomson, An Overture Presented to the Reverend Synod of Dissenting Ministers, Sitting in Philadelphia, in the Month of September, 1728, and is Now Under the Consideration of the Several Members of the Said Synod, in Order to Come to a Determination Concerning It at Next Meeting, Together with a Preface, or an Epistle Containing Some Further Reasons to Strengthen the Overture, and an Answer to Some Objections Against It (Philadelphia, 1729), 7–8, 13–16, 18–20.

SYNOD OF PHILADELPHIA

Adopting Act, 1729

As the Synod of Philadelphia convened in 1729, members representing diverse positions on confessional subscription—there were strict subscriptionists, anti-subscriptionists, and moderates calling for compromise—gathered to pray, deliberate, and decide together. Opting against schism, these church leaders, including both Jonathan Dickinson and John Thomson, produced an action, known as the Adopting Act, which advanced the benefits of subscription for the propagation of right doctrine and administration of good governance in the Presbyterian Church yet maintained freedom of conscience as a crucial principle of the Christian faith. The act also

introduced a method whereby a ministerial candidate with reservations about certain articles from the Westminster Confession of Faith could share this "scruple" with the governing body. If the presbytery or synod determined the scruple pertained "only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship, or government," the candidate could be ordained. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) today continues to use language from this act in its constitutional question asking deacons and elders to "receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do."

Although the Synod do not claim or pretend to any authority of imposing our faith upon other men's consciences, but do profess our just dissatisfaction with, and abhorrence of such impositions, and do utterly disclaim all legislative power and authority in the Church, being willing to receive one another as Christ has received us to the glory of God, and admit to fellowship in sacred ordinances, all such as we have grounds to believe Christ will at last admit to the kingdom of heaven, yet we are undoubtedly obliged to take care that the faith once delivered to the saints be kept pure and uncorrupt among us, and so handed down to our posterity; and do therefore agree that all the ministers of this Synod, or that shall hereafter be admitted into this Synod, shall declare their agreement in, and approbation of, the Confession of Faith, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, as being in all the essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine, and do also adopt the said Confession and Catechisms as the confession of our faith. And we do also agree, that all the Presbyteries within our bounds shall always take care not to admit any candidate of the ministry into the exercise of the sacred function but what declares his agreement in opinion with all the essential and necessary articles of said Confession, either by subscribing the said Confession of Faith and Catechisms, or by a verbal declaration of their assent thereto, as such minister or candidate shall think best. And in case any minister of this Synod, or any candidate for the ministry, shall have any scruple with respect to any article or articles of said Confession or Catechisms, he shall at the time of his making said declaration declare his sentiments to the Presbytery or Synod, who shall, notwithstanding, admit him to the exercise of the ministry within our bounds, and to ministerial communion, if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge his scruple or mistake to be only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship, or government. But if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge such ministers or candidates erroneous in essential and necessary articles of faith, the Synod or Presbytery shall declare them incapable

of communion with them. And the Synod do solemnly agree, that none of us will traduce or use any opprobrious terms of those that differ from us in these extra-essential and not necessary points of doctrine, but treat them with the same friendship, kindness, and brotherly love, as if they had not differed from us in such sentiments.

Source: Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America: Embracing the Minutes of the General Presbytery and General Synod 1706–1788 Together with an Index and the Minutes of the General Convention for Religious Liberty, 1766–1775 (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1904), 94.

Revivals, Dissensions, and the First Great Awakening

GILBERT TENNENT

“The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry,” 1740

Gilbert Tennent (1703–1764) converted to Christianity at fourteen years of age during his emigration from Ireland to colonial North America. He studied theology under the tutelage of his father, William Tennent, who founded the “Log College” seminary in Pennsylvania, and ordained in 1726. In his ministry, Tennent emphasized experimental piety and the necessity of spiritual rebirth through conversion. He became one of the leading Presbyterian revivalists during the “Great Awakening” in colonial North America. In 1734, the Synod of Philadelphia passed Tennent’s proposal that instructed all presbyteries to include in their examinations of ministerial candidates questions regarding personal religious experiences of “sanctifying grace.” But three years later, the Philadelphia Presbytery rebuked Tennent for crossing presbytery boundaries to preach at a church in New Jersey. Tennent protested and defended itinerant preaching as an effective means to lead people into repentance and salvation. In 1738, the Synod of Philadelphia disagreed with Tennent and passed a resolution against itinerancy because it threatened the established order of church polity. In his sermon as an itinerant preacher at the Presbyterian Church in Nottingham, Pennsylvania, Tennent railed against those colleagues who opposed his methods of itinerancy and revivalism, comparing some of them with the “Pharisee-Teachers” that Jesus had condemned in the New Testament.

My Brethren, we should mourn over those, that are destitute of faithful Ministers and sympathize with them. Our Bowels should be moved with the most

compassionate Tenderness, over those dear fainting Souls, that are as Sheep having no Shepherd; and that after the Example of our blessed LORD!

Dear Sirs! we should also most earnestly pray for them, that the compassionate Saviour may preserve them, by his mighty Power, thro' Faith unto Salvation; support their sinking Spirits, under the melancholy Uneasiness of a dead Ministry; sanctify and sweeten to them the dry Morsels they get under such blind Men, when they have none better to repair to.

And more especially, my Brethren, we should pray to the LORD of the Harvest, to send forth faithful Labourers into His harvest; seeing that the Harvest truly is plenteous, but the Labourers are few. . . . And indeed, my Brethren, we should join our Endeavours to our Prayers. The most likely Method to stock the Church with a faithful Ministry, in the present Situation of Things, the publick Academies being so much corrupted and abused generally, is, To encourage private Schools, or Seminaries of Learning, which are under the Care of skilful and experienced Christians; in which those only should be admitted, who upon strict Examination, have in the Judgment of a reasonable Charity, the plain Evidences of experimental Religion. Pious and experienced Youths, who have a good natural Capacity, and great Desires after the Ministerial Work, from good Motives, might be sought for, and found up and down the Country, and put to Private Schools of the Prophets, especially in such Places where the Publick ones are not. . . .

THE IMPROVEMENT of this Subject remains. And,

1. If it is so, then the Case of those who have no other, or no better than Pharisee-Teachers, is to be pitied: Then what a Scrole and Scene of Mourning and Lamentation, and Wo, is opened! because of the Swarms of Locusts, the Crowds of Pharisees, that have as covetously as cruelly, crept into the Ministry, in this adulterous Generation! who as nearly resemble the Character given of the old Pharisees, in the Doctrinal Part of this Discourse, as one Crow's Egg does another. It is true some of the modern Pharisees have learned to prate a little more orthodoxy about the New Birth, than their Predecessor Nicodemus, who are, in the mean Time, as great Strangers to the feeling Experience of it, as he. They are blind who see not this to be the Case of the Body of the Clergy, of this Generation. And O! that our Heads were Waters, and our Eyes a Fountain of Tears, that we could Day and Night lament, with the utmost Bitterness, the doleful Case of the poor Church of God upon this account.

2. From what has been said, we may learn, That such who are contented under a dead Ministry do not have in them the Temper of that Saviour they profess. It's an awful Sign, that they are as blind as Moles, and as dead as Stones, without any spiritual Taste and Relish. And alas! isn't this the Case of Multitudes? If they can get one, that has the Name of a Minister, with a Band,

and a Black Coat or Gown to carry on a Sabbath-days among them, although never so coldly, and unsuccessfully; if he is free from gross Crimes in Practice, and takes good Care to keep at a due Distance from their Consciences, and is never troubled about his Insuccessfulness; O! think the poor Fools, that is a fine Man, indeed; our Minister is a prudent charitable Man, he is not always harping upon Terror, and sounding Damnation in our Ears, like some rash-headed Preachers, who by their uncharitable Methods, are ready to put poor People out of their Wits, or to run them into Despair. . . .

3. We may learn, the Mercy and Duty of those who enjoy a faithful Ministry. Let such glorify GOD for so distinguishing a Privilege, and labour to walk worthy of it, to all Well-pleasing; left for their Abuse thereof, they are exposed to a greater Damnation.

4. If the Ministry of natural Men be as it has been represented; Then it is both lawful and expedient to go from them to hear Godly Persons; yea, it's so far from being sinful to do this that one who lives under a pious Minister of lesser Gifts, after having honestly endeavor'd to get Benefit by his Ministry, and yet gets little or none, but doth find real Benefit and more Benefit elsewhere; I say, he may lawfully go, and that frequently, where he gets most Good to his precious Soul, after regular Application to the Pastor where he lives, for his Consent, and proposing the Reasons thereof; when this is done in the Spirit of Love and Meekness, without Contempt of any, as also without rash Anger or vain Curiosity. . . .

If God's People have a Right to the Gifts of all God's Ministers, pray, why mayn't they use them, as they have Opportunity? And, if they should go a few Miles farther than ordinary, to enjoy those, which they profit most by; who do they wrong? Now, our LORD does inform his people, I Cor. 3. 22. That whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, all was theirs.

But the Example of our Dear Redeemer, will give farther Light in this Argument. Tho' many of the Hearers, not only of the Pharisees, but of John the Baptist, came to hear our Saviour, and that not only upon Week-days, but upon Sabbath-days, and that in great Numbers, and from very distant Places; yet he reprov'd them not: And did not our Lord love the Apostle John more than the rest, and took him with him, before others, with Peter and James, to Mount Tabor and Gethsemany? Matth. 17. and c. 26.

To bind Men to a particular Minister, against their Judgment and Inclinations, when they are more edified elsewhere, is carnal with a Witness; a cruel Oppression of tender Consciences, a Compelling of Men to Sin: For he that doubts, is damn'd if he eat; and whatsoever is not of Faith, is Sin.

Besides, it is an unscriptural Infringment on Christian Liberty. . . . It's a Yoke like that of Egypt, which cruel Pharaoh formed for the Necks of the oppressed Israelites, which he obliged them to make up their stated Task of

Brick, but allowed them no Straw. So we must grow in Grace and Knowledge; but, in the mean time, according to the Notion of some, we are confined from using the likeliest Means, to attain that End.

If the great Ends of Hearing may be attained as well, and better, by Hearing another Minister than our own; then I see not, why we should be under a fatal Necessity of hearing him, I mean our Parish-Minister, perpetually, or generally. Now, what are, or ought to be, the Ends of Hearing, but the Getting of Grace, and Growing in it? Rom. 10. 14. I Pet. 2. 2. As Babes desire the Sincere Milk of the Word, that ye may grow thereby. (Poor Babes like not dry Breasts, and living Men like not dead Pools.) Well then, and may not these Ends be obtained out of our Parish-line? Faith is said to come by Hearing, Rom. 10. But the Apostle doesn't add, Your Parish-Minister. Isn't the same Word preached out of our Parish? [A]nd is there any Restriction in the Promises of blessing the Word to those only, who keep within their Parish-line ordinarily? If there be, I have not yet met with it; yea, I can affirm, that so far as Knowledge can be had in such Cases, I have known Persons to get saving Good to their Souls, by Hearing over their Parish-line; and this makes me earnest in Defence of it.

Source: Gilbert Tennent, "The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry, Considered in a Sermon on Mark VI. 34, Preached at Nottingham, in Pennsylvania, March 8, Anno 1739, 40" (Philadelphia: Benjamin Franklin, 1740), 15–22.

JOHN CALDWELL

"An Impartial Trial of the Spirit Operating in this Part of the World," 1741

John Caldwell emigrated from Ireland to colonial North America and served as a minister in Massachusetts. He emerged as a strong and strident critic of the Great Awakening movements across colonial North America and Europe. In this sermon, which he delivered on a visit to a Presbyterian church in Londonderry, New Hampshire, Caldwell implored the congregation to evaluate the pernicious and divisive effects of the revivals according to the Bible with the rational minds God had endowed to all Christians. Caldwell found the emotional outbursts, bodily convulsions, and spiritual arrogance of the revivalist preachers and new converts did not cohere with the faithful attestations of God's redemptive work across the pages of the Holy Scriptures and events in Christian history. Caldwell's sermon was published in both colonial North America and Europe. Caldwell's ministry came to an ignominious end as he fled to England upon the disclosures that he had committed acts of fraud and

thievery in Ireland prior to his arrival in colonial North America. The contrasting positions of Caldwell and Gilbert Tennent nonetheless represent both the substantive content and the rancorous tenor of the discord between "Old Side" Presbyterian opponents and "New Side" Presbyterian supporters of the revival movements, which led to the first schism in the Presbyterian Church at the Synod of Philadelphia in 1741.

I bring the present Spirit so much boasted of in this Part of the World, to the above Rule, and unprejudicedly try the same thereby; and as it appears agreeable to, or different from the same, approve and receive, or condemn and reject it . . . I shall, with the greatest Caution, and a sincere Regard to Truth and Holiness, to the Glory of God and the Good of human Souls, proceed to consider the Nature, Effects, and Evidences of the present supposed Conversion in this Part of the World, that we may all be better able to judge of the Nature of the Spirit from whence it flows.

To any Person, that with an unprejudiced Mind hath viewed the same for these six Months past, or more, I presume its Nature will appear to be this, or very near, viz. A sudden and terrible Fear of divine Wrath, or the Miseries of Hell, occasioning in some a Sensation of Cold, in most a very extraordinary Warmth all over the Body; causing People to cry as if distracted; to shed Tears in great Plenty; throwing many into Convulsions, and a few for some Time into Despair. This continues with the Generality but for a very short Season, tho' some few feel is a little longer. In a few Days, or less, the Cloud blows, for ordinary, over; the Terror is at an End, and a more than common Cheerfulness succeeds; all their Difficulties and Doubts are removed, and immediately a Certainty that all their Sins are pardoned, and that they shall be saved, takes place; and that all their after Sins, how many or heinous soever they be, will be overlooked, upon their confidently relying on the Merits of our Redeemer.

Its Effects, in general, are, a bold talking of Experiences, as soon as the Terror is over; by which, if we judge as we would in other Cases, we are to understand their Righteousness; tho' in the mean Time that they are filling our Ears with such Discourse, they would have us believe them the most humble and self-denied of Mankind; a Contempt of all others, especially such as seem to question any Thing of what they say of their Experiences; boldly calling such carnal, and sentencing them to eternal Misery, who demand more Evidence than they think proper to give, to convince them their Spirit is from God; refusing to reason upon their Principles, telling the World none are capable to judge of their Doctrines or Experiences, but spiritual Men; i.e. such as are of their Opinions. Its Effects upon many of their Teachers are very uncommon, divesting them of all Charity to such as oppose, tho' ever so conscientiously, this present Scheme; moving them to shut the Gates of Heaven against the whole human Race, but themselves and a few of their Friends,

whose Sins God will not be offended at, as he will not approve the righteous and Christian Behaviour of others; To despise or lightly esteem the great Duties of Morality, so clearly taught, so powerfully enforced, and declared by our Saviour, to be necessary Conditions of Salvation.

Some of them it moves to leave their own particular Congregations destitute of the Ordinances of Christ, and travel to and fro upon the Earth, spiriting People against their Pastors, who are not of their Stamp, by representing them as carnal and dead Men, who have no more Right to preach than the Devil; to declare that many Errors in Judgment, Delusions of the Devil, and direct Opposition to God's Word, are no Proof of Mens being guided by a wrong Spirit; to reproach People for not being affected with what they say, i.e. because they do not shed Tears, fall down into Convulsions, scream, and prevent others from being benefited; to declare such as oppose them are guilty of Blasphemy against the Holy Ghost; to neglect the Information of the Judgment, and apply to the Passions, especially Fear; by almost constantly insisting upon Subjects of Terror, Hell, and Damnation, with Pathos and moving Gestures; to declare such Things as God declares he will condemn Men for, may yet be found in God's own Children.

Its Effects upon People, are Censoriousness and Uncharitableness to such as differ from them in that Point; speaking evil of their Neighbours, despising a holy and religious Life in all but themselves; fancying they are obliged to persuade as many as they can, to despise and leave the Ministry of their Pastors, if not agreeable to them; pretending to God's peculiar Prerogative, searching the Heart; taking deluded Imaginations for heavenly Visions; fancying their Noise and Uncharitableness, Religion; preferring the Discourses of an ignorant Person among them, to the most judicious and learned of such as differ from them; becoming Teachers of others, praying in Public, and some laying aside all Labour for the Support of themselves and Dependents. . . .

Nor is their Conversion rational, (and therefore not from the ordinary Motions of the divine Spirit) as even the first Appearance of it plainly proves. More like a bodily Distemper, than a religious Conviction, causing People to look and act distractedly, to shed Tears, to disturb God's Worship by their Noise, and fall into paralytick, hysterick, or epileptick-like Convulsions and Spasms: That this is not acting like reasonable Creatures in Religion is self-evident: Are they then supposeable to come from the divine Spirit? Are not his Operations rational? Can any Thing else work in an irresistible Manner, but Argument and Reason upon a reasonable Subject? 'Tis certain the Spirit of God of old manifested itself in no such Way. Were the Apostles in any such extraordinary Disorders, or agitated by Convulsions at their first Conversion, or when they received the Holy Ghost? Or any of the Primitive Christians,

tho' generally Idolaters before Conversion, among whom, if any where, such extraordinary Commotions might be expected? If they were, 'tis strange they never communicated any such Things to us, to be a Rule for After-ages to judge by. 'Tis true, that several Persons were pricked to the Heart: i.e. had Remorse of Conscience upon Peter's preaching that Jesus was the true Messias, and shewing how barbarously he had been murdered; but there appears no such extraordinary Commotions among them as in our Days, nor Confusion; the Jaylor and the Apostle Paul do also enquire, what they shall do to be saved, or become acceptable to God; but they did not create a publick Disturbance, nor fall into Convulsions, neither then nor afterwards, nor go away boasting of Experiences, and damning all that differ'd from them about the Modus of Conversion. They did not fancy, as appears to us, that if they could but confidently believe that Christ died for their Sins, no more was necessary, their Sins were no Sins; nor would God be disobliged with them for Sin: No; they enquired what were the Duties they owed to God and Man, and having obtained a rational and convincing Account, go away resolved to comply with the same, and hoping for Salvation thereupon...

Is a Minister's leaving the particular Society of Christians, to which he was ordained as a fixt Pastor, destitute of Sermons, from the Divine Spirit? How different is it from the Apostolick Spirit, which enjoins Ministers to take heed to themselves, and the Flock over which the Holy Ghost has made them Overseers? Is this to take Heed to, or Care of their Flocks, to leave them destitute of the Ordinances of Christ?

Source: John Caldwell, "An Impartial Trial of the Spirit Operating in this Part of the World; by Comparing the Nature, Effects, and Evidences of the Present Supposed Conversion, with the Word of God, a Sermon, Preached at New London-Derry, October 14th, 1741, on IJohn iv. I" (Boston: William Parks, 1747), 9–13, 16.

SAMUEL BLAIR

A Short and Faithful Narrative of a Remarkable Revival of Religion in the Congregation of New-Londonderry and Other Parts of Pennsylvania, 1744

Samuel Blair (1712–1751) emigrated from Ireland to colonial North America as a child, studied at the "Log College" seminary, and ordained in 1734. He was the pastor of a congregation in New Londonderry, Pennsylvania when the church encountered the stirrings of the Great Awakening in 1740. Four years later, Blair published a narrative of how the revivals transpired at his church of mostly Scots-Irish parishioners. Because of Blair's lucid descriptions of his own impressions and methods as

well as his detailed accounts of lay experiences, historians view his narrative as a particularly informative window into the life of a local congregation during the Great Awakening. Unlike the sermons from Gilbert Tennent and John Caldwell, Blair's writing reflects a pastor holding a moderate stance on the burgeoning revival movements that welcomed emotional responses to God's grace within the guiding principles of orderly Christian worship.

Thus Religion lay as it were a dying, and ready to expire its last Breath of Life in this Part of the visible Church: And it was in the Spring Anno Domini 1740, when the God of Salvation was pleased to visit us with the blessed Effusions of his Holy Spirit in an eminent Manner. The first very open and Publick Appearance of this gracious Visitations in these Parts, was in the Congregation which God has committed to my Charge. . . .

I had some View and Sense of the deplorable Condition of the Land in general; and accordingly the Scope of my Preaching thro' that first Winter after I came here, was mainly calculated for Persons in a natural unregenerate Estate. I endeavour'd, as the Lord enabled me, to open up and prove from his Word, the Truths which I judged most necessary for such as were in that State to know and believe in order to their Conviction and Conversion. I endeavour'd to deal searchingly and solemnly with them; and thro' the concurring Blessing of God, I had knowledge of four or five brought under deep Convictions that Winter. In the beginning of March I took a Journey into East-Jersey, and was abroad for two or three Sabbaths. A neighbouring Minister, who seemed to be earnest for the Awakening and Conversion of secure Sinners, and whom I had obtained to preach a Sabbath to my People in my Absence, preached to them, I think, on the first Sabbath after I left Home. His Subject was the dangerous and awful Case of such as continue unregenerate and unfruitful under the Means of Grace. The Text was Luk. 13. 7. Then said he to the Dresser of his Vineyard, behold, these three Years I come seeking Fruit on this Fig Tree, and find none, cut it down, why cumbereth it the Ground? Under that Sermon there was a visible Appearance of much Soul-Concern among the Hearers, so that some burst out with an audible Noise into bitter crying (a Thing not known in those Parts before.) After I had come Home there came a young Man to my House under deep Trouble about the State of his Soul, whom I had look'd upon as a pretty light merry sort of a Youth: He told me that he was not any Thing concerned about himself in the Time of hearing the above mentioned Sermon, nor afterwards, till the next Day that he went to his Labour, which was grubbing, in order to clear some New-Ground; the first Grub he set about was a pretty large one with a high Top, and when he had cut the Roots, as it fell down those Words came instantly to his Remembrance, and as a Spear to his Heart, cut it down why

cumbereth it the Ground? So thought he, must I be cut down by the Justice of God, for the Burning of Hell, unless I get into another State than I am now in. He thus came into very great and abiding Distress, which, to all Appearance has had a happy Issue: His Conversation being to this Day as becomes the Gospel of Christ.

The News of this very publick Appearance of deep Soul-concern among my People met me an Hundred Miles from Home: I was very joyful to hear of it, in Hopes that God was about to carry on an extensive Work of converting Grace amongst them. And the first Sermon I preached after my Return to them, was from Mat. 6. 33. . . . After opening up and explaining the Parts of the Text, when in the Improvement, I came to press the Injunction in the Text upon the Unconverted and Ungodly, and offer'd this as one Reason among others, why they should now henceforth first of all seek the Kingdom and Righteousness of God. . . . This Confederation seem'd to come and cut like a Sword upon several in the Congregation, so that while I was speaking upon it they could no longer contain, but burst out in the most bitter Mourning. I desir'd them, as much as possible, to restrain themselves from making a Noise that would hinder themselves or others from hearing what was spoken: And often afterwards I had the Occasion to repeat the same Council. I still advised People to endeavour to moderate and bound their Passions, but not so as to resist or stifle their Convictions. The Number of the Awakened increased very fast, frequently under Sermons there were some newly convicted, and brought into deep Distress of Soul about their perishing Estate. Our Sabbath Assemblies soon became vastly large; many People from almost all Parts around inclining very much to come where there was such Appearance of the divine Power and Presence. I think there was scarcely a Sermon or Lecture preached here thro' that whole Summer, but there were manifest Evidence of Impressions on the Hearers; and many Times the Impressions were very great and general: Several would be overcome and fainting; others deeply sobbing, hardly able to contain, others crying in a most dolorous Manner, many others more silently Weeping, and a solemn Concern appearing in the Countenance of many others. And sometimes the Soul Exercises of some (tho' comparatively but very few) would so far affect their Bodies, as to Occasion some strange unusual Bodily Motions. . . . There was an earnest Desire in People after Opportunities for publick Worship and hearing the Word. I appointed in the Spring to preach every Friday thro' the Summer when I was at Home, and those Meetings were well attended; and at several of them the Power of the Lord was remarkably with us. The main scope of my Preaching thro' that Summer was, laying open the deplorable State of Man by Nature since the Fall, our ruin'd expos'd Case by the Breach of the first Covenant, and the awful Condition of such as were not in CHRIST, giving the Marks

and Characters, of such as were in that Condition: And moreover, laying open the Way of Recovery in the New Covenant thro' a Mediator, with the Nature and Necessity of Faith in CHRIST the Mediator &c. I labour'd much on the last mentioned Heads; that People might have right Apprehensions of the Gospel-Method of Life and Salvation. . . . And, that neither were they to obtain or seek Peace in Extraordinary Ways, by Visions, Dreams, or immediate Inspirations; but by an understanding View and believing Persuasion of the Way of Life, as reveal'd in the Gospel, thro' the Suretyship, Obedience and Sufferings of JESUS CHRIST, with a View of the Suitableness and Sufficiency of that mediatory Righteousness of CHRIST for the Justification and Life of Law-condemned Sinners; and thereupon freely accepting him for their Saviour, heartily consenting to, and being well pleased with that Way of Salvation; and venturing their all upon his Mediation, from the Warrant and Encouragement afforded of God thereunto in his Word, by his free Offer, authoritative Command, and sure Promise to those that so believe.

Source: Samuel Blair, *A Short and Faithful Narrative of a Remarakable [sic] Revival of Religion in the Congregation of New-Londonderry and other Parts of Pennsylvania, as the Same was Sent in a Letter to the Rev. Mr. Prince of Boston* (Philadelphia: William Bradford, 1744), 10–16, 18–20.