

Presbyterians and the American Revolution

As a revolution against England became increasingly likely in the North American colonies, individual ministers and even large religious bodies weighed in on the potential conflict. This document set focuses on Presbyterian ministers and the Presbyterian church, and sheds light on how Presbyterian theology and administration both inspired and were influenced by the principles of freedom, equality, and self determination that brought about the American Revolution.

The Synod of New York and Philadelphia, which was then the national governing body of the Presbyterian Church in America, made a statement in May of 1775 that carefully advocated for both loyalty to King George III and support for the Second Continental Congress, which was meeting that very month to decide on a course of action in the war with Britain.

About a month after the Synod published its statement, a Presbyterian minister gave a decisive and politically charged sermon in support of what he called a “self-defensive war.” Rev. John Carmichael compared England’s control of the colonists to slavery, and made a case for the legitimacy of war, given the injustice of British rule. Historian Christopher Pearl wrote that not only did many Presbyterians support the idea of a revolution against England, but that some Presbyterians inspired the leaders of the revolution with their powerful sermons and scriptural support for war against an unjust colonial government.

Support for a revolution was not universal, however, and many Presbyterians were loyalists. Georgia-based minister and statesman John Zubly criticized unfair British policies and the infringement of colonists’ rights and liberties, but also promoted peaceful reconciliation with the mother country.

Document 1: Synod of New York and Philadelphia Minutes

Synod of New York and Philadelphia Minutes, 1758-1786

[manuscript] "A Pastoral Letter &c" [1775].

PHS Call number: V F BX 8951 .A3 1758-1786, c.2

**A printed transcript of the minutes is available for students (Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in America 1706-1788. Guy S. Klett, editor. Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1976; PHS Call number: BX 8951 .A3 1706-1788, K5, 1976). See pages 320-329 (original manuscript volume) or pages 543-546 (printed transcript).*

Source note: In the spring of 1775, the Synod of New York and Philadelphia, the national governing body of American Presbyterians, circulated a pastoral letter among its members to prepare them for the war ahead. Signed May 22nd, the letter was written a little over a month after Paul Revere's ride and the battles of Lexington and Concord, when war with England seemed increasingly likely.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this document? How might it help us understand our topic better?
2. Why does the Synod choose to address Presbyterian congregations at this time (page 543 in transcript; page 320 in manuscript)?
3. Why might the Synod want to emphasize that they "have not been instrumental in inflaming the minds of the people, or urging them to acts of violence and disorder (page 544 in transcript; page 324 in manuscript)? Why is that important given the historical context?
4. According to the Synod, why should people show respect for and allegiance to King George III (pages 544-545 in transcript; pages 325-326 in manuscript)?
5. The Synod, in its second piece of advice to its congregations, advises that "mutual esteem be preserved" between different religious denominations (page 545 in transcript; pages 326-327 in manuscript). Was religious toleration of this type common at the time?
6. What is the Synod's overall attitude toward the outbreak of war against England?

Document 2: A Self-Defensive War Lawful

Carmichael, John. *A Self-Defensive War Lawful, Proved in a Sermon, Preached at Lancaster, before Captain Ross's Company of Militia, in the Presbyterian Church, on Sabbath Morning, June 4, 1775*. Philadelphia: John Dean, 1775.
PHS Call number: CR AMER 1775 E13861

**This document was printed using the "long s".*

Source note: Scottish-born Rev. John Carmichael (1728-1785) was a Presbyterian minister who served as pastor of the Church of the Forks of the Brandywine in Pennsylvania from 1761 until his death in 1785. Like many Presbyterian clergy, he supported the cause of freedom during the American Revolution. Carmichael gave this sermon on June 4, 1775, less than two months after the battles of Lexington and Concord, and less than one month after the Continental Congress convened in Philadelphia.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this sermon? To whom is it dedicated?
2. What choice do colonists have at this time, according to Carmichael (page 6)?
3. What three points does Carmichael aim to cover in his sermon (page 9)?
4. How does Carmichael interpret Jesus's concept of "turn the other cheek" (pages 15, 16)?
5. What is the third inference that Carmichael makes near the end of the sermon regarding civil government (page 25)?
6. At several points in his sermon, Carmichael compares the colonists' treatment by the British up until this point with slavery (see pages 29, 30). What is Carmichael's definition of slavery, and how does it relate to the actual enslavement of nearly 500,000 Africans and African Americans in the colonies at this time?
7. Carmichael, like the Synod of New York and Philadelphia in Document 1, urges his congregation to continue to show allegiance to King George III (pages 30-32). Why is this important, and how does it reconcile with his pro-revolutionary stance in this sermon?

Document 3: A Sermon on American Affairs

Zubly, John Joachim. *The Law of Liberty: a Sermon on American Affairs, Preached at the Opening of the Provincial Congress of Georgia*. Philadelphia: Printed by Henry Miller, 1775.

PHS Call number: CR AMER 1775 E14635

**See especially Zubly's address to the Earl of Dartmouth (pages iii-xx); and pages 1-7 and 23-28 of the sermon. This document was printed using the "long s".*

Source note: Not all Presbyterians were Patriots; John Zubly (1724-1781), first pastor of Savannah's Independent Presbyterian Church, was a loyalist. In this sermon from September 1775, Zubly defends the Americans in their objections to British oppression, but also counsels against rash measures on either side. Zubly was a member of the Continental Congress from July 4, 1775, but resigned in November after being accused of providing sensitive information to the royal governor of Georgia.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this source? What information might this source provide about religion and the American Revolution?
2. What is the “whole subject of the dispute” between the colonies and England, according to Zubly (page v)?
3. What was the result of all the British violence against the colonists that Zubly has outlined on previous pages (page xiii)?
4. Who is the intended audience of Zubly’s letter (pages iii-xx)? Who is the audience for Zubly’s sermon (pages 1-32; see also unnumbered pages at the beginning of the document)?
5. Zubly uses the example of Roboam from the Bible to illustrate what point (page 2)?
6. How is the gospel a law of liberty, according to Zubly (pages 6, 7)?
7. What hope does Zubly entertain about King George (page 23)?
8. Both Zubly (page 24) and the Synod of New York and Philadelphia (Document 1, page 545 [transcript]; page 326 [manuscript]) suggest that the King of England has been misled by his advisers about the situation in the colonies. Was this a common belief at the time, and what did it say about colonists’ relationship to the British monarchy?

Document 4: Pearl Secondary Source

Pearl, Christopher. "Pulpits of Revolution: Presbyterian Political Thought in the Era of the American Revolution." *Journal of Presbyterian History* Vol. 95, No. 1 (Spring/Summer 2017): 5-17.

Source note: Christopher Pearl is a professor of early American history at Lycoming College in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. He is the author of several articles including "Our God, and Our Guns": Religion and Politics on the Revolutionary Frontier," and had a research fellowship at the Presbyterian Historical Society in 2014.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this source, and who is the intended audience? Is this a reliable source?
2. Why does Pearl compare Presbyterian ministers' oratorical style to that of Patrick Henry (page 5)? How does this advance his argument?
3. Why was it unusual and uniquely "American" for Rev. Francis Alison to suggest that people look out for "God, their neighbors & themselves," in that order (page 10)? How does this concept relate to the basic principles of the American Revolution?
4. How did Rev. William Marshall's idea of government lead him to view the practice of chattel slavery (page 11)?
5. What pastoral warnings about the failures of ancient governments, as evidenced mostly in the Bible, held true for the contemporary colonial government (page 14)? What effect did these warnings have on the congregations?
6. Why is it significant that Presbyterians were the largest religious group represented at Pennsylvania's Constitutional Convention in 1776, making up 40% of delegates (page 15)?