The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church

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Presbyterian Church—Government

Descriptive: General Assembly; Religion

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA)

by P. Gavin Ferrybh

On 21 May 1789, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) first convened in Philadelphia. As the Presbyterian national governing body, it regulates regional Synods, district Presbyteries, and the Sessions (councils) of particular local churches. All these groups consist of ministers or ordained elders. "Presbyterian" derives from the Greek word for "order," used for leaders in the Acts of the Apostles. "Pres" is derived from the same root.

Presbyterian church government is organized according to the principle "a representation of the whole should govern and determine in regard to every part, and to all parts united: that is, a majority shall govern and consequently that appeals may be carried from lower to higher judicatures." (Fifth General Assembly, 1793). For Presbyterians, the General Assembly guarantees historical continuity and serves as a final court of appeal, exercising the sort of supervision provided by bishops in other Christian churches. Presbyterians constitute one variety of Reformed Christianity, standing consistently in the traditions of John Calvin and John Knox.

Key Dates:
1843: John Wesley Powell was born in Mt. Moriah, New York.
1862: The Union Army won the Battle of Shiloh. (For more information on this topic, see "The Battle of Shiloh" in Book of Days, 1987.)
24 May 1869: Powell's Colorado River Expedition was launched at Green River Station, Wyoming.
3 April 1878: Powell's Report on the Lands of the Arid Regions was presented to Congress.
23 September 1902: John Wesley Powell died in Haver, Maine.

This resource guide has been prepared by Emily Sager, Reference Librarian, Montana State University, Bozeman, Montana.

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Adult Works about the Subject:

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Presbyterian church government is organized according to the principle "a representation of the whole should govern and determine in regard to every part, and to all parts;... that is, a majority shall govern and consequently that appeals may be carried from lower to higher jurisdictions." (Fifth General Assembly, 1793). For Presbyterians, the General Assembly guarantees historical continuity and serves as final court of appeal, exercising the sort of supervision provided by bishops in other Christian churches.

Presbyterians constitute one variety of Reformed Christianity, standing consciously in the traditions of John Calvin and Huldrich Zwingli. These Reformers emphasized the gracious majesty of God who promises salvation and election through Jesus Christ and who gives the Church the Law as a means of structuring faultlessness. Reformations often subsume their "secular" callings, believing that no part of life is unrelated to God.

Presbyterian identity was shaped by seventeenth-century conflicts in British society, especially within the Church of England. Closely allied with, and sometimes indistinguishable from the Puritans, Presbyterians arrived in colonial North America with a reputation for argumentativeness and financial acumen. Francis Makemie, a Scottish minister, is credited with organizing the first churches with Presbyterian (and Scottish) character; he helped to convene the first General Presbyterian Church in 1706.

The stresses of frontier development and social change occasioned several divisions. Among the most serious of these divisions was the 1830s split between Old School and New School partisans over questions of slavery and evangelical revivalism. At the outbreak of the Civil War, southern Old School Presbyterians withdrew from the divided General Assembly to form what became the Presbyterian Church in the United States. In the north, Presbyterians overcame the Old School/New School schism in 1859, but the New School division endured. Both groups experienced growth, wider involvement in domestic and international missions, and encountered conflicts with new schismatic ideas.

In the twentieth century, American Presbyterians have provided much leadership in ecumenical ventures, fostered many social issues with racism and militarism, and formalized the leadership of women as elders and ministers. Recently Presbyterians ended over a century of north-south division with the reunion of The Presbyterian Church in the US and the previously consolidated southern church. The present church sponsors seventy colleges and eleven theological schools, a historic support for an educated clergy and laity.

Presbyterian theology emphasizes the primacy of Scripture. Presbyterians generally believe strongly in the importance of God's Sabbath and their calling to be productive workers for God's kingdom. Affirming "the inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty," they highly value public political involvements while respecting the human rights of all. Presbyterian distinctiveness lies in the careful balancing of clerical and lay power within an inclusive and formal understanding of the church's nature and mission. Presbyterians usually emphasize high personal moral character but recognize diverse opinions about what constitutes morality.

A person visiting a particular Presbyterian church might experience some of the diversity among Presbyterians. Viewpoints could range from arch-conservative to politically radical. The preaching could concern social and psychological issues, evangelical personal discipleship, or doctrinal orthodoxy. Often found more in urban and suburban areas, Presbyterians sometimes display a "urban bias" and upper-middle-class social attitudes. They remain earnestly united in diligent use of time, talents, and financial resources. With just over 3,000,000 members, the Presbyterian Church (USA) enters its third century with a continuing and lively involvements in education, political, and social issues.


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Prior, Matthew, 1664-1721
Secondary Headings:
- English poet
- Poets, English

Descriptors:
- Diplomats
- Literature

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Matthew Prior, 1664-1721
by Frances Mayhew Rippy

On 21 July 1664, Matthew Prior, English diplomat and poet, was born in Westminster to Elizabeth and George Prior, a linen draper. Prior became the most important poet to write in England during the years 1700-1712. His poetry sharply influenced Pope, Swift, Johnson, William Cowper, Cowper's brother, Wesley, Amass, William, and all other great men of English literature. He is particularly important in his own time in maintaining the tradition of the domestic heroic couplet, a form which carried over in the Restoration, of his lyricism, levity, of his satirical abilities and anapests. Also an important diplomat, Prior helped to draw up the Treaty of Ryswick and negotiated the Treaty of Utrecht.

At the age of eight, Prior entered Westminster School, but had to withdraw three years later when his father died. In the next year, Charles Sackville, sixth Earl of Dorset, discovered Prior reading Horace behind his uncle's back, and impressed him with an impromptu translations of Horace into English, eventually paid Prior's tuition to return to Westminster School, where in 1661 he became a King's scholar. On 3 April 1663, he received a scholarship to St. John's College, Cambridge, from which he graduated in February 1667. In July of that same year, Prior and Montagu won instant public acclaim with their mixed verse and prose parody of John Dryden, The Hind and the Panther Translated.

For two years, 1688-1690, Prior supported himself by acting as secretary to Lord Darley, the English ambassador to The Hague. There, he played an important role in negotiating the Treaty of Ryswick, signed in September 1697. During this period he wrote a range of verses, and by 1692 had been both printed and praised by the two most important publishers in England, Tonson and Moxon. In 1700 he served as secretary to the British embassy in Paris. On about 23 March 1699, he was elected fellow of the Royal Society. During the years 1700-1702, he served as secretary to Lord Darley, the English ambassador, also serving a February-June 1701 term as a member of Parliament from East Grinstead in Sussex.

Prior continued to gain attention and even fame as a practicing poet. When the fifth part of Tonson's Miscellanies appeared in the winter of 1703-1704, it was a sensation: in 1707, Edmund Curll published a pirated edition of Prior's Poems on Several Occasions; in 1709, Jacob Tonson printed an authorized edition, later reprinted many times. By 1710, Prior was also writing prose for the Tory Examiner and perhaps was in general charge of that political newspaper. Prior's chief activities in 1710 were as a poet, and in 1711, Beginning on 12 July 1711, he carried on secret negotiations which culminated on 11 April 1713 in the signing of the Treaty of Utrecht, ending the War of the Spanish Succession.

In late September 1712, Prior was appointed minister plenipotentiary for France, where he served as acting ambassador in Paris, and was sent on a mission to the Hague in August 1714. When Queen Anne died, the Tories fell from power and Prior fell with them. The House of Commons set up a secret committee to investigate those instrumental in drawing up the Treaty of Utrecht, and in mid-June, 1715, Prior was called to testify before the Committee. By his evasive testimony, he saved from the charge of treason both Duke of Shrewsbury and the Earl of Oxford, but he enraged the committee by his open deprecation of the king's policy, and was discredited at the house of the government, the House of Commons from July 1715 to 26 June 1716. While under house arrest, he wrote a satirical tristich-canto mocking attack upon all systems and system-building: Alma, or, The Progress of the Mind. After his release, Prior returned to his elegant career as editor and poet. In London, his political career ended and his finances improved. Lords Allen Bathurst and Edward Harle invaluable then conceived the scheme of bringing out Prior's poetical works.

Jacob Tonson became its publisher, and Prior became a valuable advisor. When the volume finally appeared in mid-March 1715, it was a sensation: the three-volume, the most serious of Prior's poems, and Alma. This volume made Prior a small fortune, and left him comfortably well off for the rest of his life. Although Prior never wrote another poem, he lived throughout his adult life with a series of three mistresses: Jane Ansell, Anne Durham, and Elizabeth Cox. His newly made wealth enabled him to fix his Duke Street house with so many treasures that it became known as "Matt's Palace." During the first half of 1720, Prior and Edward Harley jointly purchased Down Hall, a country estate in Essex, which became known as the subject of Prior's Down Hall: A Ballad. In 1721, a guest of Edward Harley at Rimpole, Prior suffered a week-long attack of "cholera morbus," and died on 18 September 1721. His body was taken to Westminster Abbey, where it was buried in 25 November 1721 in Poets' Corner. He left behind him a professional career distinguished in politics and in poetry.

Some sources state Prior's date of birth to be 23 July, although this precise birth date is conjectural, figured back from his date of baptism.

Reference Sources:

The most important single source of Prior materials.


Swift's first-hand account of his friendship with Prior and Prior's personal and political comings and goings.


Letters to, from, and about Prior from his most significant friends.

Works by Prior:

The definitive edition, further enriched by detailed bibliographical and textual materials available only in its commentary.

Adult Works about the Subject:

Earliest full-length study of Prior's diplomatic and poetical career.


The best single bibliographical study of Prior.


An often unfriendly, but careful reading of Prior's poetry.


Focused on Prior's career as a diplomat, not as a poet.