

PRESBYTERIANS AND AMERICAN CULTURE: A HISTORY by **Bradley J. Longfield**, John Knox Press, 2013, 262 pages

Reviewed by James F. Cubie, Reformed Institute Company of Teachers

Director of Children's Ministry, Providence Presbyterian Church; Candidate, Teaching Elder; Certified Ready to Receive Call, National Capital Presbytery; Former Director of Youth Ministry, Takoma Park Presbyterian Church; M.A., MDiv, Union Theological Seminary (NYC); ThM (Systematic Theology), Princeton Theological Seminary; Member, Worship and Theology Committee, National Capital Presbytery; Member, Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church (Bethesda, MD)

Where do we stand? And: What is possible, given where we have stood since the beginning of our church's witness on these shores? These questions force themselves - again and again - on the reader of Bradley J. Longfield's *Presbyterians and American Culture: A History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013) Longfield serves as the Dean, and as a professor of church history, at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, and has written on strife within the Presbyterian world before, in his 1993 work *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates* (Oxford University Press). That work, which focused on a series of seven, decisive figures, from J. Gresham Machen to the partnership of Henry Sloane Coffin and Robert Speer, tended to view its subject through the lens of the life and works of those leaders. In this, new work Longfield has drawn a much wider - but no less detailed - picture, which leaves us on the doorstep of the PCUSA in the present. That 'doorstep' is one we know all-too-well: precipitous membership decline, and division within the Body, which is so deep that many fear we are about to stop fighting at the edge of the cliff, and will simply fall off.

How can this book help? In at least two respects. First, we can - and, indeed, should - take it as it was intended: as a history, which traces our development as a church within the United States. Sounds simple enough, but since it has been so well done in this case, we can see clearly how we have continuously circled around a cluster of issues, which Longfield identifies as a constant tension between an identity granted to the church by Christ, and a culture which simultaneously attracts, because it mirrors some of our best traditions (just read the "Historic Principles of Church Order" in our Book of Order), and seduces, perhaps for precisely the same reason. The second way in which this book may help, is if we look carefully at its beginning and the end, and see in the two, very different periods represented there, a possibility for the present. The first option is something I should not reproduce in a review: I hope the review will prime you to want to take that journey yourself, and draw your own conclusions. I will pursue the second option, here.

In his first chapter, Longfield points out that the Presbyterian Church, initially flourished in the colonies because it was nimble enough to deal effectively with pressing cultural and political problems concerning authority, liberty, and order. At first, these problems were addressed as one might imagine they would be: through attempts at unification via polity and a Confession. The Rev. John Thompson, in 1729, proposed the adoption of the Westminster Confession, as a means of staving off the possibility of continuing to be a church guided by - but not truly

committed to - a Confession: this "was especially a hazard because the church was so young and unestablished and had no school in which to train orthodox ministerial candidates. Moreover, the lack of confessional clarity handicapped the church in efforts of discipline because the church had no bar by which to judge theological offenders." (3) However, the entrenched cultural differences between the New England clergy, and the Scots-Irish, primarily to be found in the South, supported and reinforced many of the necessary conditions which kept the arguments around confessional and political unity alive and well. The New Englanders had been around for not quite a century, and therefore felt well-established. The Scots-Irish had only just arrived. They lived and worked on the frontier, and would therefore "feel almost instinctively the usefulness, indeed necessity, of a more carefully defined church in the midst of a diverse, chaotic, foreign society, in order to provide for 'spiritual growth and moral safety'." (5) All of this came to a head in the "Adopting Act" (1729) which set Westminster - the Confession and Catechisms - as the standards, but which allowed "scruple" to such a degree that it could hardly be considered an act which entailed subscription. Furthermore, the discernible results of the Act, in the areas of peace and unity, were nil. Some Presbyteries attempted unqualified subscription, but this, also, was only so much discussion with very little result.

At about the same time as these wranglings, revivals began to happen. The Great Awakening, spearheaded by figures such as George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards, transformed the debates that had exhausted and - in large measure - stalled the Presbyterian Church. Under the leadership of the revivalists, the church became forward-leaning in a number of important respects: first, of course, in the presentation of the Gospel to the world outside the church, and then in efforts to push back with real force against the worldliness of the commerce and entertainment of the day. The Tennents - William, and his eldest son Gilbert - became the spearhead of revival within the Presbyterian Church. Gilbert, especially, led the charge through preaching for awakening, and attention to conversion, which included careful instruction in doctrine, and discipling under the close watch of a skilled pastor. The Tennents took a controversial measure in the establishment of a "Log College", in which students were prepared to be sent out as itinerant revivalists. Synods pushed back, and insisted on an educated and examined clergy, and restricted the freedom to preach outside one's presbytery. Tennent - who had partnered with Whitefield, and was encouraged by him - issued a kind of response to this "push back" in perhaps the most significant sermon of his ministry: "The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry". As you can imagine, the sermon was not the final blow in this controversy, but the Awakening which led to its writing had done the transformational work necessary to make this an exemplary period worth reconsidering as we now jump to the end of Longfield's account.

At the beginning of Longfield's epilogue, he points out that since reunion in 1983, our "communion has seemingly moved from one crisis to another." (201) These crises have led to an "unprecedented hemorrhage in membership - about 50 percent since 1965 - that has resulted in the closing of congregations and massive budget shortfalls and staffing cuts at the national level of the church." (201) These crises are theological only in the sense that large scale threats like secularity, have not been met with robust, theological engagement. Let me

explain: My sense is that these crises have increased in direct proportion to the extent to which we are willing to say: "It's all a mystery", instead of: "Here is the Gospel..." We have drawn the line of mystery too soon, and too often. When this happens, of course, the only game left in town is politics: Churches abhors a vacuum. Longfield calls this "the ascendancy of polity", and favorably cites Joseph Small (who spoke at a National Capital Presbytery meeting, on the same subject, in March of 2013) when he maintains that our most pressing differences are not being resolved by Reformation according to the Word, but by "... 'procedures that mimic American-style liberal democracy rather than expressing the character and quality of ecclesial community'." (202)

If, indeed, we are at a moment of crisis, and it is because of our captivity to "American-style liberal democracy", what, then, must we do? We can begin at Longfield's chapter which details the last sixty to seventy years, and get a handle on the many historical, cultural, and political reasons for why we are, where we are. Any person who plotted a way forward without these lessons (and those of the rest of the book...) in mind, would probably be doomed to repeat them. But we could also look carefully at Longfield's first chapter, and see there something which might be necessary, now: Revival. To be sure, in the work of the Tennents, Whitefield, and Edwards, we should not see a blueprint, which we simply force onto the present. And for all the reservations we might have about how "the ascendancy of polity" has landed us where we are, we must admit - and cherish - a number of real, lasting changes that God has brought about through the fights of the past several years.

But now what? The word "Revival" may scare many of us. It scares me. And it certainly is not something we can manufacture ourselves. Will we debate our way out of the present decline? Can we research our way out of it? Can we program, or manage, our way out of it? Let us keep the peace and order of the church, and its commitment to responsible governance. If we set to one side the necessity of intellectual labor, faithfully done, we will miss the right tools to get the job done. And when churches are poorly managed, they die by inches and creeping disarray. But something new is required, and we must turn to those sources which reveal how it has happened in the past - how we have been Awakened -, and then we must... pray.