

Colonial American Presbyterianism, A Review Article

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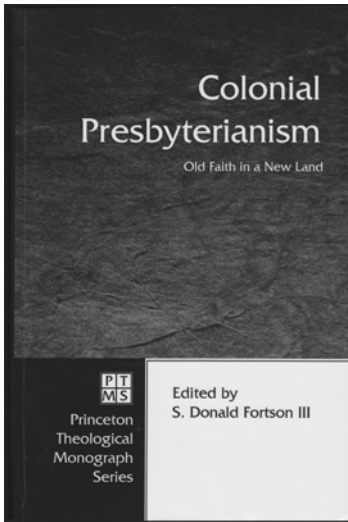
- ***Colonial Presbyterianism: Old Faith in a New Land.* Edited by S. Donald Fortson III. Princeton Theological Monograph Series. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2007, 236 pp., paper. ISBN 978-1-59752-531-2**
- ***The Presbyterian Creed: A Confessional Tradition in America, 1729-1870.* S. Donald Fortson III. Studies in Christian History and Thought. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009, 276 pp., paper. ISBN 978-1-60608-480-9**

For students of colonial American Presbyterian history, these works are two “must reads” and invaluable references. Donald Fortson III’s name appears on each, thereby uniting the two books under review as they clearly reflect his area of interest and expertise – colonial American Presbyterianism. He presently teaches at Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, North Carolina, and is an ordained minister of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

The first book, *Colonial Presbyterianism: Old Faith in a New Land*, was published as part of the Princeton Theological Monograph Series. This series has some entries that clearly fit into the area of historical theology, such as John A. Vissers’ *The Neo-Orthodox Theology of W. W. Bryden*. However, many explore specific topics of systematic theology.

Colonial Presbyterianism has ten contributors; and, as Fortson states in his preface, “Readers may notice some diversity in the interpretations offered by the contributors as the story is narrated from different perspectives. This kind of variety is nothing new for Presbyterian historians. As early as the nineteenth century, Presbyterians would offer diverse interpretations on the colonial era as they continued to debate the residual issues that had been passed on to their generation” (p. xi). I so appreciated this gracious, bold and “up-front” statement at the beginning of this book. Recently I have been alarmed by the virtual revisionist, conservative, “party-line” interpretation being circulated in some circles. Fortson acknowledges the complexity of interpretations and does not try to gloss over these, but the volume also allows for healthy exchange.

This volume centres around the year 1706, when the first presbytery was formed in Colonial America. However, it does not just focus upon this event. In my estimation the top three essays of the ten were the following: Samuel T. Logan, Jr.'s "Puritans, Presbyterians, and New England" (pp. 1-25); David



B. Calhoun's "The Log Colledge" (pp. 47-61); and David Fortson's "The Adopting Act Compromise" (pp. 63-85). Logan's essay is very thought provoking and needs to be read together with Appendix A, "The Saybrook Platform" (pp. 219-222). He clearly writes with a rich background on Edwards and brings alive the context of the Great Awakening and colonial Presbyterianism and Congregationalism. As a Canadian reading Logan's essay, I could not help but think of the first ordination and presbytery meeting in Nova Scotia in 1770. The parallels are absolutely striking; however, I will refrain from intruding into this review with that story.

Calhoun's article on the Log Colledge may not be enticing because the story is so popularly known, but Calhoun's footnotes alone are worth a very careful read. The author reminds the reader of Princeton Seminary's founding professor and the esteem in which Archibald Alexander held the work of the Log Colledge and these revival preachers (p. 47). Calhoun further reminds us that Alexander basically chastised Charles Hodge for being quite negative on the New Side leaders. Evidently, Alexander's challenge came to temper Hodge's initial thoughts, and he later wrote with applause (p. 47) – all in the footnotes. But I did not just read Calhoun's footnotes; the main text of his essay is very rich and full of many things over which to reflect. For example, consider this paragraph:

Furthermore, the Old Side held that it was sufficient to examine a prospective minister's learning and knowledge; the New Side put equal, if not more, importance on the candidates' spiritual qualifications. Tennent's purpose was to train faithful men for the ministry. He believed that "fervent piety" was the first and foremost qualification of a minister. Tennent never tired of reminding his students that they must "keep close to the written Word of God," and so keep their hearts "in all diligence." He urged them to cultivate in their lives "a Godlike temper which is pleased with anything that makes for the glory of God." He warned them against "mere formality and hypocrisy." The Log Colledge men and

the New Side Presbyterian Church “were not satisfied with doctrinal correctness alone; doctrine had to be attached to personal piety” (p. 53).

Fortson’s essay “The Adopting Act Compromise” (pp. 63-85) is in some ways a condensation of part of the second book, *The Presbyterian Creed*, into one essay. Obviously, it is not as extensive chronologically; but if one wants a shorter version covering many of the same interpretive ideas, this essay is it. He identifies the parties and, in particular, the Irish context of subscription and really presents a remarkable essay. The title of the essay itself will not go over with all because by adding the noun “compromise”, he has given his interpretation. Now, the question remains, is Fortson’s interpretation correct? I will let readers make their own judgment as they read his historical data. I for one was convinced.

Other helpful essays include Brian LeBeau’s “Jonathan Dickinson and the Reasonableness of Christianity” (pp. 113-134), which is a fine piece of writing and one of the best I have seen on Dickinson. William Barker’s “The Heresy Trial of Samuel Hemphill (1735)” (pp. 87-111) also makes for very interesting reading. Other contributors include D. Clair Davis, C. N. Wilborn, D. G. Hart, James H. Smylie and L. Gordon Tait.

As with all collections, essay styles vary and the reader’s interest will vary. Nevertheless, this is a “must” collection on American colonial Presbyterianism. As one reads the collection, one will quickly make the application to “What about today?”

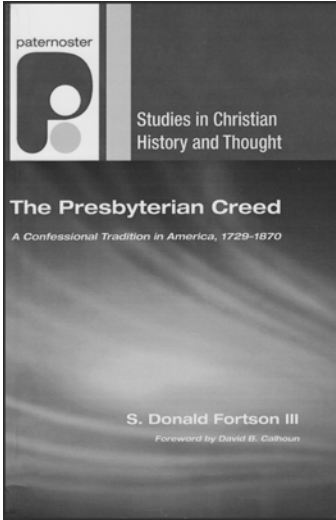
The second book, *The Presbyterian Creed: A Confessional Tradition in America, 1729-1870*, is in the series Studies in Christian History and Thought published by Paternoster in the United Kingdom and in America by Wipf and Stock, 2008 and 2009 respectively. The author very succinctly states in his preface why he has written this book. I quote this in full:

Several factors motivated the author to write this book. First, is the widespread ignorance of this period among Christian laymen, seminary students and pastors. It is a forgotten era but has much light to shed on contemporary discussions of what is [sic] means to be Presbyterian and Evangelical. Secondly, there is still significant misunderstanding about the nature of New School Presbyterianism and simplistic distortion of New School views on confessional subscription. The third motivating factor is a response to the truncated telling of the Presbyterian story which suggests that the Southern Old School Church was the last bastion of orthodoxy in the late nineteenth century. This book will humbly attempt to display the whole scope of Presbyterian perspectives on confessional subscription during the time frame of our study. It is my hope that the telling of this American Presbyterian story (1729-1870) will encourage the Church to pursue biblical faithfulness in

the present generation (p. xix).

Even if the reader disagrees with Fortson's conclusions, the reasons he states for writing this work are very well articulated.

The book begins with a very tightly worded foreword by David B. Calhoun, formerly Professor of Church History at Covenant Theological Seminary. Calhoun writes that Fortson is not so much breaking into new source material but rather is breaking new ground "in interpretation and application" (p. xiii). He goes on to state, "This book demonstrates that the American Presbyterian church (or churches) have held somewhat differing views on confessional subscription, but it also shows that the enduring view (through the reunions of the 19th century) has been a moderate rejection of extremes, a long lasting commitment to the genius of the Adopting Act of 1729" (pp. xiii-xiv). What follow then are eleven chapters and a conclusion.



The first chapter is parallel to the essay reviewed above in the collection *Colonial*

Presbyterianism. Chapter two deals with the New Side/Old Side divisions of the eighteenth century and is a good contextual summary of the essence of this division – a worthwhile read in its own. Chapters three ("New Divinity and Revivalism"), four ("Missions, Education and Taylorism"), five ("A House Divided") and six ("The Great Schism") help to provide a wonderful contextual history leading up to the nineteenth century American division into New School/Old School. Chapters seven and eight deal specifically with New School Presbyterians and "Old School Charles Hodge" respectively. Perhaps chapter nine could be broadened out. Logically these topics are followed by the nineteenth century reunions of New School/Old School bodies, and that story is told skillfully in chapters nine, ten and eleven.

The book ends with a finely crafted conclusion, which will no doubt receive much attention by all readers. Though only three pages in length (pp. 239-241), there is much here. I will refrain from quoting any lines and give a challenge to all who enjoy the study of North American Presbyterian history to buy the book and read this very carefully. Make sure you read more than the conclusion, but ponder the conclusion well.

Here are two very helpful books which deserve serious study. Classes on American Presbyterian history will be well served by these. Ministers will benefit in a serious study of them. *The Presbyterian Creed* has obvious consistency and unity of presentation, chiefly because it is a solo voice. *Colonial Presbyterianism*, since it is a collection, actually reveals some of

the fracture lines of contemporary interpretation. Both books very much stimulated my thinking about the Church, then and now.