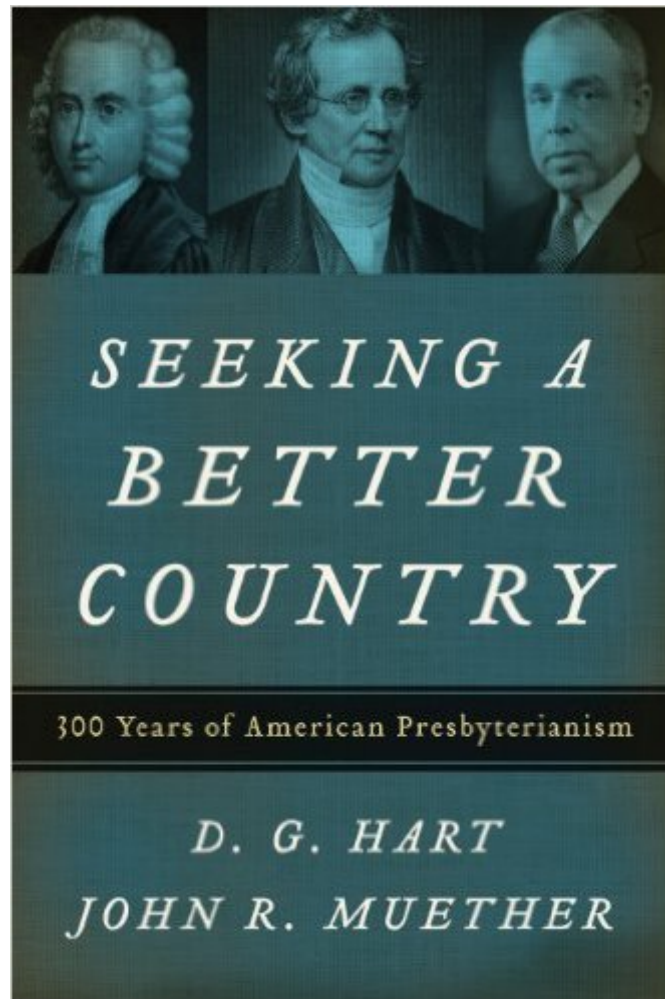


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Seeking A Better Country: 300 Years Of American Presbyterianism



Synopsis

Seeking a Better Country is a readable and lively survey of American Presbyterianism since its founding in 1706. Its aim is not to celebrate but to understand how Presbyterians formed one of the largest and most influential denominations in the United States, and to identify historical developments that led to Presbyterian decline.

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Customer Reviews

Overall, a superb description of the main body of Presbyterianism in America, with its branches. The authors describe how Presbyterianism reached America, and why the first Presbyterian denomination in America was formed without foreign initiative or control. They show how this has given American Presbyterianism a distinctive stamp, and they trace the growth, development, and eventual splintering of the Presbyterian denomination. There is a wealth of information, and the authors bring humor, balance, and a sense of perspective to the issues Presbyterians have wrestled with over the centuries. They are very good at identifying the strengths and weaknesses of individuals and groups and at sounding an appropriate note of praise or caution. At the end, they stress the provisional nature of uninspired history and the need for humility in making evaluations. In fact, if there is one criticism I have of the work, it is that the humility the authors profess and recommend seems a bit overdone. If that is the case, however, underconfidence is perhaps easier to appreciate and to put up with than overconfidence. I would recommend this book for all students of church history. Of course, it has a special appeal for Presbyterians, and it may help many of us to

understand better where we are and how we got here. One immediate value that it has is that of putting into perspective various controversies that continue in evangelicalism and Presbyterianism today. Whether you are conservative or liberal, and whether your emphasis is more on doctrinal conformity or on social change, this book is likely to challenge and perhaps change some of your strongly held assumptions.

Excellent book with all of the names, dates, and stories you expect in a well-researched book of history. But this book also traces the rhythms and trends of American Presbyterianism so that the reader finds clearer insight about current ecclesial issues as we trace similar tensions back through the Presbyterian system of roots. The opening chart of Presbyterian history is worth the price of the book.

Hart and Muether, frequent collaborators, have written a very illuminating, interesting, and timely study of Presbyterianism in America. Balmer and Fitzmear's work from the early '90s is also a good introduction to the subject, but they acknowledged from the outset that they were not writing from a Presbyterian perspective. Hart at the time of writing this book (2007) was director at Wheaton College's Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals, and Muether was the denominational historian for the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC). The sense I had was that these authors had a bit more at stake in their research, and came at the subject with a more intense interest in learning and sharing what they learned. The assessment offered by the authors is neither celebratory nor condemnatory, but sober, reasoned, and balanced. While Balmer and Fitzmear cover essentially the same period and material, Hart and Muether's history takes time to explain the background and the significance of the events they recount, resulting in a richer and more illuminating study. While Balmer and Fitzmear ably relate what happened, Hart and Muether do a better job of exploring why it mattered (and matters). While the authors touch upon the other branches of the Presbyterian "family" in America (the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, as well as the EPC, OPC, and PCA), their study essentially traces the development of what since 1983 has been known as the PC(USA) (full disclosure--the denomination in which I am ordained). They are not "cheerleaders" for any of these branches--not even their own: whatever bias the authors may have they did a fine job of bracketing. The text would have benefitted from one more round of copy editing. That's about my only criticism. This history is a very welcome addition to my library. Anyone interested in American denominational history, the history of the "mainline" churches and their decline, or American history,

would find this study worthwhile reading. It would be especially helpful for anyone interested in trying to learn how the PC(USA) came to have the theological shape it has today, and why the PC(USA) seems so divided on several issues that seem on the face of it more social and cultural than Biblical in nature.

Really got into this book. As a Presbyterian in a changing time, I read with great interest how the church has struggled with differences over the time of its American history. Have passed it own to others.

This book is incredibly well-written. As the other comments note, the authors are measured in their assessments of key figures and churches in this historical assessment. The goal seems to have been: to ACCURATELY & REALISTICALLY present history as it really was - without embellishing or overstating - so that we may appropriately and cautiously respond to the challenges within our denomination today. What a joy to read the concluding chapter about the church we ultimately look toward! May the Lord be praised through this well-done work.

I loved this book because Hart does an excellent job of developing how theological verdicts don't happen in a vacume. By using the historical contexts of various religious controversies, not only does the reader get the opportunity to learn about history but becomes better acquainted with theology as well.

'Shows the close interaction between Presbyterianism and the development of our country's history. Makes me wish we hadn't bought into the mantra of 'politics and religion don't mix'.

Very informative background to read before engaging theology authors of the 20th century.

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