IMPRESSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FROM AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN HISTORY, PART 2

Victor Hall

This article is the conclusion of Dr. Hall’s review of American Presbyterian history begun in our last issue.-Ed.

In keeping with a desire to maintain unity with those who shared the same commitment to the same body of Reformed truth, Presbyterian Assemblies and Synods made several attempts to form closer ties with Dutch, German and French reformed churches. (These attempts were largely unsuccessful. The Dutch and German reformed churches continued to have strong but distinct identities in this country, and most of the Huguenot church was absorbed into other denominations.) However, a matter of special concern was the separation of the Presbyterian church from a large body of their own countrymen who shared the same heritage. New England Congregationalists used the law to prevent Presbyterians from practicing their convictions regarding the form of government believed “to be most agreeable to the Word of God.” Forbidden to establish presbyteries, Presbyterians sought to establish other ways of maintaining standards of the ministry, administering church discipline, and other matters. They elected to work in concert with other churches in a certain area by forming associations on various doctrinal platforms. The association most nearly adhering to Presbyterian principles among these churches was that which became known as the “General Association of Connecticut.” There had been efforts to promote a union of these Presbyterians with the Synod of the Presbyterian Church in the United States but there were areas of polity that presented a barrier against those efforts. Now, with the rapid expansion into western Pennsylvania and Ohio, immigrants from Connecticut and New England were settling in many of the same areas as were immigrants from New Jersey, eastern Pennsylvania, New York, and other middle colonies. This brought New England Calvinists into close contact with the Presbyterians from the middle colonies. Accordingly, the need to find amicable means of relating to each other in the common task of promoting the gospel became increasingly apparent.

Under these circumstances, discussions of some means of union began in earnest. These discussions were the beginning of a great change and a new source of danger for the church. As early as 1723 the PCUS corresponded with the New England churches with an eye to possible union. Samuel Baird, in his *History of the New School*, says,

> The identity of the theology of the two denominations (the General Synod of the Presbyterian churches and the Connecticut Association) and the comparative agreement on the subject of order and government, early induced intimate and confidential relations between the New England churches and those of the General Synod.

At that time it was discovered, however, that certain differences and laxity in practices of church government in the New England churches were a serious obstacle. A study of the controversies in the Connecticut churches during the course of the eighteenth century will reveal a great struggle between the Presbyterians and the Congregational elements of that Association which ultimately resulted in serious compromise. Now with the prospect of a general proximity of these churches, both claiming the name of Presbyterian, ministering in contiguous and often in the
same communities, the situation took on a sense of urgency so strong that it tended to dull the
presbyters’ perception and render them insensible of grave dangers that lurked in these
considerations.

In 1801, the two groups formulated a plan of union that seemed to assume that they had
safely settled all matters of doctrine. The plan focused only on means of harmonizing many of
the Congregational principles in practice among the Connecticut churches with the strictly
Presbyterian principles of the Presbyterian Church in the middle and southern states. Samuel
Baird says of this plan, “The imprudence of allowing such a break in her walls, as that involved
in the plan of union, might have been expected to arrest a more prompt attention and secure its
rejection. But the Assembly was seduced by the siren of union and peace.” So keen was the drive
to secure the imagined benefits of union that, as an animal lured by the bait into a snare, caution
was thrown to the winds. Again, Dr. Baird says, “The plan was adopted, and the way thus
prepared for the corrupting of the doctrines of the church, the utter defacing of her order, and
the introduction of protracted controversy and strife and final schism.” Let us note well that the
union of a weaker party with a stronger will never strengthen the weaker party but will always
weaken the stronger. Once the principle of tolerance of error has been admitted, no matter how
small or insignificant the point over which it was admitted, that principle of toleration has gained
a foothold and will ever insist on larger gains and further compromise. This was definitely the
case in the plan of union of 1801.

The plan of union provided for not just a cooperation between the Congregational and
Presbyterian ministers and churches, but for a full participation in policy making. Lay leaders
from Congregational churches, neither ordained nor holding any church office, were allowed to
sit, deliberate, and vote in the Presbyteries. To conduct discipline in churches where there was a
mixed membership of Congregationalists and Presbyterians, elders were set aside and a
committee of unordained laymen were given the power to “sit in judgment in the first instance
of all cases arising in the church.” Added to this confusion were increasingly prominent and serious
departures from some basic Calvinist doctrines in the New England churches. It is easy to see
why Dr. Baird says, “…The way was prepared for corrupting the doctrines of the church.”

The arrangement in this plan was said originally to be a temporary one to assist churches
where neither side was strong enough to support a church of its own. However, Dr. Baird
provides documentation to show that this “temporary” arrangement became a permanent
loophole allowing Congregational ministers and churches to gain entrance into the Presbyteries
with full voting powers as well as rights of deliberation and debate on any matters of doctrine or
policy that might be brought before them. Dr. Baird also documents that in some cases whole
Presbyteries made up of these Congregational churches formed and gained entrance into the
Synod through this plan of 1801. He goes on to say that the intimate relationship between the
Presbyterian churches and those of New England “precludes the possibility that the former could
fail to be more or less affected by the radical changes which were taking place in the doctrinal
principles of the other.” Such ill-considered associations inflicted incalculable and irreparable
damage to the church in the early nineteenth century.

The New England clergy now had the way opened for them not only to preach in their
churches which had been received into the presbyteries but also to enter into pastorates in any
church of any of the presbyteries and synods who might desire or be induced to receive their ministry. Worse yet, the plan allowed ministers to do these things without submitting to an examination of doctrine as a requirement of admission. Dr. Baird, in his *History*, points out that almost immediately after these the implementation of these arrangements with the New England churches in the plan of 1801, the ministers from these churches began propagating their doctrines in the Presbyterian churches into which they now had access. We should keep in mind that these ministers were supposedly Presbyterian ministers, in the most part trained in New England colleges. But unlike their Presbyterian counterparts in the middle colonies, they had not been required to adopt the *Westminster Confession of Faith* as their confession of faith nor were bound by this *Confession* in their ordination vows. They did profess to confess and believe the substance of the doctrines of the *Westminster Confession*. However, there was little commitment to the verbal expression of those points of doctrine that they deemed to be of lesser importance. Such an attitude allowed leeway for considerable private judgment and interpretation. It might be pointed out that the Presbyterian Church in the middle colonies recognized the need to respect scruples of conscience, but in these presbyteries such scruples must be expressed to the presbytery where they would be carefully, prayerfully examined. Furthermore, individual views must be found in harmony and agreement in substance with the statement of the particular doctrines in the *Westminster Confession*. If such harmony and agreement with that *Confession* was not found, or if the candidate could not be induced to conscientiously confess the statement of the *Westminster Confession* to be the substance of his own confession, he must be rejected.

Such requirement was totally lacking to the Presbytery of New England. First, there had been no official act of adoption requiring that every minister or candidate must unreservedly confess the *Westminster Confession* as his own confession of faith as a requirement for admittance. Second, there was a basically undefined tolerance for individual interpretation and judgment of the relative importance of the doctrines confessed. Thus we see the destruction of that wall of defense, namely, that every minister must subscribe to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* as his own confession of his faith. This wall had been the safeguard of the church’s doctrine through the crucial period during and following the time of the Whitefield revivals and on until the end of the eighteenth century.

Dr. Baird says of these New England men who began to disseminate new theological innovation in some of the Presbyterian churches, “These brethren, generally, held some phase of the Edwardian or Hopkinsian theology.” The primary features of this theology were: 1) The denial of the doctrines of original sin, 2) the denial of the inability of the will to make right choices and produce righteous works of obedience to God’s laws, 3) denying the doctrines of imputation, they denied that Christ’s death was a vicarious sacrifice where our sin was transferred (imputed) to Him. Likewise, they denied the doctrine of justification by faith in the righteousness of Christ imputed to us by grace alone. These theologians emanating from the New England schools became heralds of the “new” theology that was nothing more than the old Pelagian doctrines of a bygone era, dusted off to plague the church once more. They became the champions of confidence in man’s free will. In their view Christ’s death was merely an exhibition of the love of God for sinners, a display of the evil of sin, its just desert and the goodness of God in pardoning it.
A further development of this New England theology was brought to prominence at New Haven in the definition and explanation of regeneration as stated by Dr. Taylor, professor of Didactic Theology at Yale. He defined regeneration as, “That ultimate act of the will, in which the soul, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, chooses God, as its supreme good.” This initial statement on regeneration seems at first glance to be innocuous; however, in its explanation given by Dr. Taylor, its true Pelagian character unfolds. Dr. Taylor said:

…We propose to use the term regeneration—that act of the will or heart in which God is preferred to every other object…. We proceed then to say, that before the act of the will, or heart, in which the sinner first prefers God to every other object, the object of the preference must be viewed or estimated as the greatest good. Before the object can be viewed as the greatest good it must be compared with other objects; as both are sources or means of good. Before this act of comparing, there must be an act dictated, not by selfishness, but by self-love, in which the mind determines to direct its thoughts to the objects, for the sake of considering their relative value, or forming a judgment respecting it, and of choosing one or the other as the chief good…. The sinner is the subject of that constitutional desire of happiness, called self-love; to which no moral quality pertains. Let the sinner, then, as a being who loves happiness and desires the highest degree of it, under the influence of such a desire, take into solemn consideration the question, whether the highest happiness is to be found in God, or in the world; let him pursue the inquiry, if need be, till it result in the conviction that such happiness is to be found in God only; and let him follow up this conviction, with that intent and engrossing contemplation of the realities which truth discloses, and with that stirring up of his sensibilities, in view of them, which shall invest the world, when considered as his only portion, with an aspect of insignificance, of gloom, and even of terror, and which shall chill and suspend his present active love of it; and let the contemplation be persevered in, till it shall discover a reality and an excellence in the objects of holy affections, which shall put him upon direct and desperate efforts to fix his heart upon them; and let this process of thought, of effort, and of action, be entered upon as one which is never to be abandoned, until the end proposed by it is accomplished; until the only living and true God is loved and chosen, as his God forever; and we say, that in this way, the work of regeneration, through grace, may be accomplished.

Please understand that proponents did not openly and clearly proclaim these doctrines in these terms but couched them in language that tended to mitigate any real differences with the Westminster Confession. The New England theologians did not regard themselves and their views as a rejection or denial of the Westminster standards but rather a restatement of the salient doctrines. They regarded themselves as Calvinists but holding to a looser subscription which allowed for individual differences in understanding and explaining of these prominent tenets of the faith in accord with popular understanding and experience of them. Dr. Baird points out that these views when first published caused very little stir in New England. There, strict subscription to the Confession had never been required, and individual differences in the explanations of what these doctrines meant had long been prevalent. Now, through the “imprudent” adoption of the plan of union this ambiguity of doctrine became national in scope and was the basis of a strong party in the church. Again, Baird observes that the new views from New England started out “professedly, in the interest of vital religion, and zeal for the salvation of souls; and, in all its history, wherever propagated, it has assumed this guise, and affected to oppose itself to a ‘dead orthodoxy.’”

This spirit received great impetus from the rise of, what has popularly been termed, the “Second Great Awakening.” Charles Grandison Finney espoused the New England theology, particularly the New Haven system. His view of the nature and means of regeneration was that set forth by Nathaniel W. Taylor (see above). Finney did not widely propogate the particulars of his theology in his preaching, but his theology was the basis of his methods and, as we will note
presently, has great implications for us today. At present, it is sufficient for us to consider its impact on the Presbyterian Church of 1801-1838. This brought about a polarization of the church into two parties. First, the Old School contended for a strict subscription and maintained a strict adherence to the language and the doctrines as defined in the *Westminster Confession*. Second, the New School party favored a general adherence in substance with the doctrine of the *Westminster Confession* but tolerated a great leniency of expression of those truths in agreement with one’s understanding and experience of them. So strong was the controversy that it divided the church into two separate denominations from 1837-1869. Again, because of the subsequent history of the church, this development has serious implications for us today and will be discussed in a later paragraph.

It must be emphasized, there is no connection whatsoever between the Old Side/New Side schism of 1741-1758 and the Old School/New School schism of 1837-1869. The only point of similarity was that there was a revival at the time of each which elicited strong responses from the two parties in the church at that time, but for totally different and unrelated reasons. In the schism of 1741-1758, there was no question nor difference of doctrine or polity, and the reunion in 1758 involved no compromise in either. Charles Hodge demonstrated that there was no difference of doctrine or polity between the two Synods of that time, and the history of the church after the reunion in 1758 until the ill-considered plan of union in 1801 resulted in tremendous growth and development of the church in purity and harmony of doctrine and practice.

In the Old School/New School schism of 1837-1869, the cause and perpetrator of the controversy and division was the introduction of aberrant theology and the corruption of the doctrine of the church. In regard to the schism of 1741-1758, a happy reunion between two wholly, doctrinally, compatible parties was not only possible but desirable. In regard to the latter, the schism of 1837-1869, reunion without major change of both doctrine and church polity was impossible without doing violence to doctrine and compromising sound polity.

In order to comprehend the lasting effect that these doctrinal intrusions into our church have had, we need to consider two things. First, note the change that was wrought in her attitude toward deviant doctrine. We may compare the attitude of the church in the 1740’s with that of the Presbyterian church in the 1830’s. Mr. David Cowell from New England had been settled as pastor at Trenton. It became evident in his examination that he held that self-love was a legitimate motive of seeking salvation, and it was indeed the foundation of all obedience. Gilbert Tennent charged him with unsoundness and brought him to trial, and the Synod condemned his teachings on this subject. Thus we see the quick judgment in the 1730’s against a false doctrine which, when reintroduced into the church in the early nineteenth century, found a large party to befriend it. This is perhaps the most significant change that came over our church at that time, and we will see how it continues to affect it today.

We have noted how an alien theology was introduced into our church. It is truly difficult for us to understand how a church which had been so zealous for sound doctrine could have been so undiscerning as to have agreed to such an obvious breach in her defenses as that which was opened in the plan of union of 1801. However, it is far more startling to learn what a high degree of tolerance for these deviant doctrines came about within the first few years after the plan was
implemented. What is even more perturbing is to see the continuing effect of this change not only for the rest of the nineteenth but on into the twentieth century. Truly the Presbyterian Church underwent such a change in the early third of the nineteenth century that its character was considerably altered. It has never returned to that degree of purity and devotion that it had during the eighteenth century. In order to see this clearly, we must consider the basic issue that the church faced at this time.

We have noted that doctrines contrary to those stated in the *Westminster Confession* and the catechisms were introduced into the church. It is true that those disseminating these contrary views were a minority, but they were a significant minority. Dr. Baird, in his *History*, points out that these aberrant doctrines were presented as the doctrines of revival while those who objected and insisted on adherence to the doctrinal standards of the *Confession* were caricatured as favoring and fostering dead orthodoxy. Added to this were the revivals that were producing astounding visible effects. These revivals reflected and enhanced the preaching and methods of Charles Finney and were bringing great numbers into the churches. New churches sprung up, and the morality of entire communities changed. Ministers laboring in these communities and in presbyteries where the excitement of the revivals pervaded the churches found it extremely unpopular to speak against it. It was difficult to persuade the people that the harbingers of such revival blessing were not the very messengers of truth to dispel the darkness of a dead orthodoxy produced by a “formal” ministry relying upon the sufficiency of preaching doctrinal truth. The situation on the one hand fostered an attitude of cooperation in those who were not discerning of the dangers lurking within this popular movement. On the other hand, neutralism characterized those who, though distrustful of the methods and modification of the doctrine being disseminated, desired to avoid controversy and pursue a peaceful coexistence with those favoring the revivals, since they were the apparent means of visible growth of numbers and enthusiasm in the church. Dr. Baird, in his *History of the New School*, traces in great detail the development of the New School party in the church which consisted of, first, a considerable number who actively adopted and promoted the new theology as the theology of the revival; and second, a great majority who, though not active promoters of the new theology, desired to avoid controversy because they believed it was a hindrance to the progress of the work, the growth of the church and the gospel.

Some may try to maintain that this is the same controversy of those favoring and those opposing revival that we saw during the “Great Awakening” in the 1740’s. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the Old Side/New Side schism, there were controversies because of certain excesses of emotional display and because of differences in evaluating that which was compatible with genuine revival and that which was not. But there was not a valid question over sound or unsound doctrine, and though some of the Old Side were very condemnatory in their expressions against the revival, there was no question of unsound doctrine promoted or preached. Charles Hodge, in his assessment of the revival says,

> We have …sufficient ground on which to form a judgment on this subject [genuineness of the revival]. We compare the doctrines then taught, the exercises experienced, and the effects produced, with the Word of God, and thus learn how far the work was in accordance with that infallible standard.”

After many pages of detailed examination of the doctrines, experiences and results of this remarkable work of God, he then states,
…the soundness of the doctrines taught, the experiences detailed, and the permanent effects produced, abundantly attest the genuineness of the revival. To the Presbyterian Church, particularly, it was the commencement of a new life, the vigor of which is still felt in all her veins.

The Old School/New School controversy over the revivals of the 1830’s however, was a controversy over sound Presbyterian doctrine versus a modified theology though nominally Presbyterian, yet containing Arminians and Pelagian elements. True Calvinistic Presbyterian doctrine was at stake. This was the issue in the controversy that resulted in the schism of 1837. The great majority of the New School party were those termed moderates: they themselves were not committed to the new theology or the new methods of evangelism, but favored toleration of these views and methods in the church for the sake of peace and growth. This issue divided the church.

During these controversies, the New School had gained the ascendancy in getting their agenda carried through the General Assembly. Dr. Baird says of this New Side objective, “The design was to so liberalize the church, as to render her comprehensive of all grades of theological opinions, nominally evangelical.” While many would dispute that extreme statement of the New School side’s views, it is true that moderation and tolerance were the primary emphases and results of their activities. It is noteworthy that Princeton Seminary during this time of mounting controversy, tended to avoid being drawn into the heat on either side. Definitely, however, Princeton’s sympathies and convictions lay with the Old School and it ultimately sided with the Old School party on the doctrinal issue. The seminary was opposed, however, to cutting off the New School men from the denomination. This would tend to emphasize how strong was the sentiment in the denomination toward toleration of these varying doctrinal views in their midst. Again, it must be emphasized that these diverging views were not as wide ranging as some would have us believe, and none of these New School men of that time would be termed liberal in our sense of the word today. No one questioned the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures. There were no open avowals of Arminian or Pelagian doctrines. Such doctrines entered in only as explanations and interpretations of the Calvinist, Presbyterian doctrines which the proponents nominally held. It was toleration of these varying interpretations and explanations in the context of the nominal Calvinistic Presbyterianism that the New School insisted on and practiced. Thus the church divided. The Old School championed a strict adherence to the language and doctrines of the Reformation as defined in the Westminster Confession of Faith. The New School professed adherence to the same Confession, but with a loose conscription allowing latitude for differences of interpretation and expression by individual confessors.

We might wish that the saga could end here with clearly defined issues dividing Presbyterians whose affiliations identified their doctrine positions. This, however, was not to be. The Civil War, the issue over slavery, the trauma of defeat in the South, and the disruption of southern life during the period of reconstruction all brought tremendous pressure on the church and on individual lives. These social forces pressing in requiring a spiritual response seemed to dull the perception of the importance of doctrinal distinctions. Explosive emigration westward added to these pressures. The overwhelming spiritual vacuum in these western and far-western areas demanded the strongest possible missionary exertions of the church. All of these compelling needs combined to create a sense of urgency for reunion.
Surprisingly, the first move toward reunion came from the part of the church that had been the chief stronghold of the Old School. The New School, United Synod, united with the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States in 1864. Later, this reunited church became the Presbyterian Church in the United States (Southern Church) after the end of the Civil War. The Old School and the New School Synods in the North united in 1869 to continue on as the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (Northern Church). Dr. David Beale in his book *In Pursuit of Purity*, says of this reunion, “The Northern reunion brought a wide range of theological thought under the same denominational umbrella and invited into the Presbyterian Church in the USA increasing toleration towards doctrinal diversity.” Indeed, what we see in the reunited Old School/New School Synods in the Presbyterian Church in the USA in 1869 is the seed of tolerance for deviant doctrines and the “poison fruit” practices which it produces.

We cannot make a solid line from New School theology to modernism. However, that theology paved the way for modernism’s entrance by insisting on tolerance for doctrinal differences and the new methods stemming from those differences. Indeed, it is this matter of tolerance that ultimately triumphed in the reunited churches of both the North and the South. This principle of tolerance enabled German rationalism and its handmaiden, higher criticism, not only to gain an entrance into the seminaries but to be disseminated in the church. German rationalism had begun to emanate from Europe during the latter part of the eighteenth century, though it did not begin to gain a significant entrance into America until the last quarter of the nineteenth century when a good number of Americans began studying in Germany. When Charles A. Briggs began to teach German rationalism and higher criticism at Union Theological Seminary, the General Assembly tried him and suspended him from the ministry. However, the real problem in the denomination became clear after the trial was finished. Though Briggs’ teachings were condemned, the seminary withdrew from the denomination and retained him in his teaching position. The spirit of tolerance spread throughout the church so that Union Seminary graduates found a ready entrance into Presbyterian churches. Such a favorable attitude in the church was largely due to a large party in the church who were known as “tolerant conservatives” who thought that the denomination should be broad enough to include Briggs’ views. Within thirty years the modernist liberals were strong enough to openly defy the doctrinal standards and the General Assembly. Within forty years, they were in control of every board and agency of the church. Again, once the principle of tolerance for unsoundness is legitimized by acceptance, it will seek ever larger concessions and demand more compromise.

Thus through the recognizing of tolerance as a valid principle in dealing with error and false doctrine, the church in the early twentieth century could not control heresy. Tolerance—which had served its purpose for the liberals—is then rejected by them as a principle except as it may be practiced by their opponents to their favor.

Thus, the faithful ministers of the truth are dispossessed, denied the tolerance toward themselves liberals had so lately urged, and their only recourse is separation. However, we must be aware that the reunited church of 1869 was a reunion incorporating the differences of doctrine and practice of the New School and reinstating them in the reunited church. Thus reconstituted, the church has acceded to the New School principles of which the chief is tolerance of differences of doctrine and practice in her midst. Sadly, we find that the separating church has taken with it the root of the controversy, namely, tolerance for differences of doctrine and
practice. Don Matzat in an article, “Assessing the Promise Keepers” in Christian News, refers to the reunion of the Old and New Schools of the Presbyterian Church in 1869 and says, “The serious issues controverted in the 1830’s were not settled, they were simply passed by.” As successors of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, the Bible Presbyterian Church is heir to the glorious heritage of fidelity to the Word of God and militancy for the purity of doctrine so characteristic of the Presbyterian Church from 1729-1800. Unfortunately, she is also heir to all the unsettled controversies and their concomitant evils of the Presbyterian Church of 1801-1936.

In the act of separation we dealt with one issue, a vital issue that arose out of lax vigilance and waning militancy for truth. However, we have left undisturbed the root, i.e., that tolerance of deviance of doctrine and practice from our Westminster Standards which fosters laxity in these areas. In relation to this remaining problem in our midst, Mr. Matzat says again:

While we are well versed in the threat of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, German rationalism and liberalism, are we equally aware of the deception and jaded history of 19th century American evangelical revivalism? We know all about Albrecht Ritschl, Frederick Schleiermacher, and Rudolph Bultmann, but are we familiar with Charles Finney, Nathaniel Taylor and Timothy Dwight?

The unsettled controversies and problems raised and perpetuated by these men are part of our heritage. The disturbances rising from them will be a part of our experience until we deal with them biblically.

The principle of toleration for the differences of doctrine and practice in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America was particularly evident during the early struggles against modernism in the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries (1889-1923). During those years, the General Assembly, instead of declaring its unequivocal and unshakable stand on the doctrines of the Word of God as stated and defined in the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Catechisms, opted to formulate a minimal five-point doctrinal statement affirmed to be essential to common Christianity. These five points became the basis for common cause with fundamental denominations and associations in their united battle against modernism. In such a context, the “Fundamentals” were useful and proper, but in the Presbyterian Church which was committed to the doctrines of Scripture as delineated in the Westminster Confession, it was an abandonment of her standards to stand and fight against error in the denomination on the lesser, weaker base of general fundamentalism with its varying theological viewpoints and emphases. This amounts to the abdication of its doctrinal distinction to become merely another undistinguished “fundamental” church.

In the continuing Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (Bible Presbyterian General Synod), this principle of tolerance of deviant doctrine was further evident in the early years of our church by the presence of dispensational theology in the teaching of many of its churches, but even more evidence of the presence of the principle of tolerance for deviant doctrine and innovative worship and practices is seen in the area of cooperative evangelism where unsound doctrine is promoted and where methods springing from erroneous doctrinal bases are employed. Although the promotion of dispensational theology has nearly, if not wholly, died out, it cannot be denied that it was very much in evidence in earlier years of our history. The ebbing of that theology in the Bible Presbyterian Church is perhaps due to the
passing from the scene of many older men who came through the disruptions of the
fundamentalist/modernist conflict of 1889-1936 and the Bible Conference movement of the late
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The involvement of the church with the 19th century
American evangelism is much more subtle and persistent. Charles Finney is generally considered
the author of modern evangelical revivalism. Mr. Matzat says of him in this regard, "Charles
Finney’s ‘new measures’ in revivalism left an indelible stamp upon evangelicalism. Evangelism
crusades, revival meetings, the altar call, …the use of excitement and emotion to facilitate
decision, and the attempt to promote the moral reformation of the culture can all be attributed to
the ‘new measures’ introduced by Charles Finney in the 1830’s. Many of the modern evangelical
movements such as Church Growth, PK, and the religious right find their roots in Finney.
Evangelicals cannot escape his influence.”

Finney’s doctrine of regeneration is described earlier in this report under the discussion
of New Haven theology as stated by Dr. Nathaniel Taylor. He denied the doctrine of original sin
and total depravity. He believed that man is able of his own free will to respond to the gospel if it
is clearly and persuasively presented. He believed that the new birth is the change of heart and
mind that results when the sinner chooses of his own free will to follow Jesus. He acknowledged
that the Holy Spirit is the primary inducing agent to persuade the sinner to make the choice,
while the preacher is the secondary agent and the Word of truth is the instrument which the Spirit
uses. However, Finney taught that the choice is the act of the sinner’s own free will in response
to the persuasive arguments and excitement of the emotions brought to bear upon it. Thus the
emphasis shifted away from what God has done (the emphasis of the preaching during the first
“Great Awakening”) to what man can do and must do (the emphasis of Finney). Since the new
birth is an act of the human will influenced by methods of persuasion, he taught that “every
excitement, however raised, is to be cultivated and cherished” as a means of motivating the will.
He also taught that since various methods of appeal grow stereotyped and lose their effect, “you
must try something new.” He thought that by skillful use of these continually changing methods,
attention may be kept awake from a long course of years (Lectures on Revival, Charles
Grandison Finney).

These innovative methods have become the norm for nearly all evangelistic ministries of
modern evangelicalism today from Evangelism Explosion to Promise Keepers. The siren call of
Finney’s message and methods in his day was that they produced evident visible results,
thousands of “conversions” (decisions); phenomenal church growth, both in increasing numbers
in individual congregations and new churches established; reformation of society through the
transformation of the character of entire communities; also the desire to transform society on a
national scale. Slavery was becoming a dominant issue in our country at that time; later it would
be alcohol and the temperance movement that would supply the impetus to forget and lay aside
doctrinal distinctions and differences to concentrate the churches’ united efforts and resources on
a common overriding cause. This same magnet of Finney-based innovative methods because of
their apparent results in the siren song that draws multitudes into the net of evangelical programs
of cooperative evangelism, social reform and doctrinal compromise today.

Dr. Baird, in his History of the New School, provides us with ample material for a
detailed study of the results of this infatuation with and employment of these innovative
“evangelistic methods by many of the ministers and congregations in the Presbyterian Church in
the first half of the nineteenth century. He demonstrated how the unity of her doctrine and practice was thoroughly disrupted and gave way to wide variations of theological emphases and growing dependence on innovative methods of ministry.

The same results are manifestly evident in the evangelical church today in the form of seeking church growth through the development of “seeker-friendly environments” and need-conscious ministries in our church congregations, attracting and reaching young people through the use of music and exciting programs which cater to their tastes and interests; distinctive ministries, seminars and conferences for family support and renewal; massive rallies and coalitions to facilitate moral and social reform; and, in the meanwhile, the addition to the offices of the church a “certified” office of specialized counseling in an effort to cope with the moral, ethical, and spiritual problems which arise out of a failed ministry.

Sadly and alarmingly we see the spirit, not only of tolerance, but of espousal of these Pelagian methods within the bounds of our own “continuing” Presbyterian Church. Let us responsibly and prayerfully contrast the message of the apostle Paul in pagan Corinth as he declares, “I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified …. my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power; that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God” (I Cor. 2:2-5). Compare Question and Answer No. 155 in the Larger Catechism:

Q. How is the Word made effectual to salvation?

A. The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation.

It was this manner of preaching with this kind of total dependence on the power of the Spirit of God to make the Word of God effectual to salvation in the hearts of men that produced the Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was this kind of preaching with total dependence on the power of the Spirit of God to make the Word of God effectual to salvation in the hearts of men that produced the Great Awakening of the 1730’s and ‘40’s. Are we willing to sell the power and ministry of the Spirit of God in our midst for a bowl of Pelagian pottage?

May God in His mercy give us repentance from prayerless, ineffective ministries. May He deliver us from sinful resorting to man-devised programs and methods. May God graciously grant us a return to the ministry of prayer and faithful preaching of the Word of God with total dependence on the power and ministry of His Spirit in our midst. Amen.