THE PRINCETON TRADITION: A HISTORY TO REMEMBER
–A LEGACY TO PRESERVE

Christopher K. Lensch

Introduction: Princeton and the Bible

At the founding of Princeton Seminary in 1812, the school’s spiritual godfather, Archibald Alexander, set the course for Princeton in his inaugural address. He preached from John 5, verse 39: “Search the Scriptures.”

Without the Scriptures there would have been no Princeton Seminary. The Bible was its main impetus and sole message. Certain outsiders, however, squirmed at the thought of living within the teaching of the Bible alone; Charles Finney caricatured Princeton’s message as “straight-jacket theology.”

Charles Hodge, on the other hand, was happy with the sufficiency of Scripture. Beginning and ending with the Bible, he would often sing the refrain, “I have never advanced a new idea….” He said he sought to “state and vindicate the doctrines of the Reformed Church…. Having become satisfied that the system of doctrines taught in the symbols of the Reformed Churches is taught in the Bible, I have endeavored to sustain it, and am willing to believe even where I cannot understand.”

For more than 100 years, faithful exposition and application of the Bible was the hallmark of Princeton Seminary. This faithful testimony left its imprint upon thousands of students, upon many Reformed churches in America, and upon the nation itself.

The Need for Princeton Seminary

Princeton Seminary was established in dark days. In the international arena, America faced an uncertain future. War clouds were hanging dark over the infant nation in 1812.

With the rich religious heritage of its early colonists, the land already had enjoyed nearly two centuries of the blessings that come from evangelical Christianity. The remarkable decades from 1730 to 1750 “…had glowed with the incandescent light of the Great Awakening….“1 From 1790-1810, however, morality and church attendance were at an all-time low. The brutalizing effect of the earlier War for Independence had left scars on America, and the wild seeds of the libertines had blown across the Atlantic from France like downy tufts of dandelion.

At Yale the students were addressing one another as “Robespierre” and “Voltaire.” Infidelity was institutionalized at Harvard University in 1805 when the Unitarians kidnapped the chair of theology, expelling the last vestige of orthodoxy there. In 1807 there was a general student rebellion at Princeton College, the very school to which the Presbyterian Church was looking to train its ministers.
Newly secured freedoms, protected by the First Article of the Bill of Rights, meant citizens could experiment in religious expressions or avoid religion altogether. Post-Revolution economic stress led to one of the greatest social upheavals in American history. Pioneers carved out paths into the frontier wilderness, and thousands of families migrated west in search of opportunity and self-sufficiency. Most did not take their churches with them.

The newly organized Presbyterian Church in the USA recognized the appalling state of religion in America. The 1798 report of the General Assembly was typical of the annual reports of that era:

We perceive with pain and fearful apprehension a general dereliction of religious principle and practice among our fellow-citizens, a visible and prevailing impiety and contempt for the laws and institutions of religion, and an abounding infidelity which tends to atheism itself. Profaneness, pride, luxury, injustice, intemperance, lewdness and every species of debauchery and loose indulgence greatly abound.2

Finally, to promote true religion and to keep up with the growing country,3 the church’s General Assembly approved a plan to start a new seminary for the denomination. Princeton Seminary was the answer to the call. Its charter recognizes this need:

So rapid...has been the extension of this Church, and so disproportionate, of late, has been the number of ministers educated, to the call which has been made for ministerial service, that some additional and vigorous efforts to increase the supply are loudly and affectingly demanded.

This need was not just for more bodies to fill pastorates, “…but that they should be more thoroughly furnished than they have ordinarily been for the arduous work to which they must be called.”

*The Tradition Starts Small*

Princeton, New Jersey, was the logical choice for the church’s new training school for ministers. Under the leadership of giants like Jonathan Dickinson, Jonathan Edwards, but especially John Witherspoon, the College of New Jersey had grown through the 1700s from a backwater school into Princeton College, one of America’s premier institutions.

Princeton actually traced its roots to the “Log College” of Neshaminy, Pennsylvania, across the Delaware River. In the small cabin in his backyard William Tennant trained several of his sons and neighbors to preach the Word. The Log College spawned other simple training schools that often sprung up in log cabins. Out of these theological academies came the first teachers at the embryonic Princeton University.

Princeton would host the new seminary which would take over from the college the training of Presbyterian and Reformed ministers. The College would also provide early facilities, especially a valuable library.

Archibald Alexander was the choice for Princeton Seminary’s first professor. He had been one of the loudest voices in the denomination calling for a school dedicated for training its
leaders.

Son of a Presbyterian elder, Dr. Alexander’s spiritual pedigree was staunchly Presbyterian. His resume showed experience as an educator-administrator; he had turned down a professorship at Dartmouth to lead the Presbyterian college at Hampden-Sydney, Virginia.

Alexander also had served as a pastor and as an itinerant evangelist. On one of his revival tours in northern Virginia, Archibald married a pastor’s daughter, a pastor who had sat at the feet of George Whitefield.

Archibald Alexander and his family moved to Princeton in the summer of 1812. That August, they welcomed Princeton Seminary’s first three students. A few more were added in the spring and next summer, so the first year’s classes were held in the comfort (though not always the quiet) of the Alexander home. In the Log College tradition, this home served as the classroom, library, chapel, and dining hall. It was a model of enlightened piety.

The Tradition Grows

Overtaxed in his responsibilities of training all the ministers for the Presbyterian Church, Archibald Alexander asked for help and got it. The General Assembly the next year drafted Rev. Samuel Miller of New York City to come teach church history and church government at Princeton Seminary.

Miller himself was also of Scottish and Puritan stock, descending from the line of John Alden and Priscilla Mullins of Mayflower fame. Samuel’s father was a Presbyterian pastor, and his wife was the great-granddaughter of the first President of the College of New Jersey (Princeton College). The American Reformed tradition was imbedded in his family.

Seven years later the young Charles Hodge was ordained and given a one year appointment to teach at his alma mater. Hodge came at the recommendation of his mentor, Archibald Alexander, to teach Greek and Hebrew.

With a measure of trepidation he entered into his new calling, writing his mother that “It seems to me that the heart more than the head of an instructor in a religious seminary qualifies or unfit him for his station.” Charles Hodge had learned well the principles of life, first at the feet of his widowed mother and then from Archibald Alexander and Samuel Miller.

Hodge’s faith would be tested by German rationalism during his ensuing two years of study in Europe under some of the most eminent scholars of the age. He also was confirmed in his faith by contact with men like George Müller (of London orphanage fame) and young Adolphe Monod, a leader in the French “Awakening.”

Later at home Hodge would reflect on the unbelief on the continent. How could the birthplace of the Reformation turn into such a center for anti-Christian attacks on God and the Bible? He remarked that the Reformation was followed by “a period of cold orthodoxy brought about principally by perpetual controversy on unimportant subjects.” A pietistic revival of the 1700s followed the era of cold orthodoxy, but the pietism of Spener and Francke’s movement
was not anchored in systematic doctrine or confessional truth. In the following summation by David Calhoun, Hodge captures Princeton’s balance of “spirit and truth” that kept it on course for more than a century:

‘It is this vital connection between piety and truth,’ stressed Hodge, ‘that is the great and solemn lesson taught by the past and present state of the German churches.’ Hodge claimed that ‘holiness is essential to the correct knowledge of divine things and the great security from error,’ ‘Wherever you find vital piety,’ he added, ‘there you find the doctrines of the fall, of depravity, of regeneration, of atonement, and of the deity of Jesus Christ.’ The Christian’s mind must enlighten his affections; the Christian’s heart must animate his thoughts and actions.6

**The Men of the Princeton Tradition**

So far we have surveyed the origins and early history of Princeton Seminary. Now we must consider what made Princeton the vital institution that it was in the last century. Its lasting impact might be measured in contrast to other contemporary seminaries. It will suffice, however, to ponder the size of its imprint on the lives of its students, upon American Presbyterianism, and to a degree, upon America itself and far-flung mission fields.

The most natural answer to the question of Princeton’s greatness lies, of course, in its grand faculty. From our vantage point we look back and whisper, “There were giants in the land in those days!” Great luminaries come to mind-Archibald Alexander, Charles Hodge, B.B. Warfield. Significantly, God granted these men long lives so that their longevity served as a conserving force in the stability of the institution.

Still, these three men did not stand alone. Mention any of the other faculty members from this era and most conservative Presbyterian pastors will acknowledge familiarity. They were all giants. They generally led their peers in America in their respective fields of study.

Besides sharing their erudition in the classroom, the faculty wrote tracts and books and carried on scholarly correspondence. Probably the most significant contribution in promoting Princetonian thought were the critical reviews and articles that were published in its seminary journals like the *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*. Many church leaders hung their own informed opinions upon the cutting edge analyses coming out of Princeton Seminary, especially in the latter 1800s when so many manifestations of rationalism were attacking the historic Christian faith. These journals were an invaluable tool in publicizing Princeton’s orthodoxy, as well as in “casting down imaginations and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God.”

This suggests the cliché, “publish or perish.” Princeton published and it prospered. It was an arduous task. Editor Charles Hodge called the responsibility “a ball-and-chain… with scarcely any other compensation than the high privilege and honour of making it an organ for upholding sound Presbyterianism, the cause of the country, and the honour of our common Redeemer.”7

Writing formal articles was undertaken by faculty members whose schedules were already burdened with responsibilities in the classroom and in the affairs of the church. Still they
knew that writing was a priority as much as researching and teaching.

These men were great because they had big hearts ever before developing giant intellects. They were men who showed faith and piety in their home life and in their school life. The professors were keenly interested in their graduates’ ministries, especially those on foreign fields. Alexander pleaded for an unbroken channel of correspondence from his students serving in foreign lands. This interest, stirred up with the news from the field and supporting prayer groups on campus, kept the gospel vision fresh for the students and their churches. By the time of the Civil War, one third of Princeton’s graduates had entered foreign missions.

Influence through its Graduates

Even after leaving the halls of Princeton, Presbyterian ministers young and old turned to the leadership of the Princeton professors. The testimony of the professors communicated an abiding integrity that could be trusted.

An illustration of this lasting relationship is suggested by Charles Hodge’s loyal audience in the *Princeton Review*. After every annual Presbyterian General Assembly meeting, he would write an analysis of Assembly actions as well as comment on trends in the life of the church. The absorbing interest in this annual review was such that Hodge’s colleagues cared little to publish their scholarly articles in the same July issue! Mark Noll observes, “This quickly established Hodge as one of the most visible arbiters of Presbyterian opinion in the century.”

Not all Princeton graduates were Presbyterian. The Princeton Tradition was entrusted to other evangelical and Reformed students who percolated the Princeton influence through their own denominations. Many Episcopalians were welcomed and several became bishops. The catholic-spirited Lutheran, Samuel Schmucker, and John Nevin of the German Reformed Church were trained at Princeton.

Drawing students from all quarters to bequeath them with a clear message and a dynamic model, Princeton was bound to sway more than the American church. The maxim “as goes the church, so goes the nation” explains the critical role that Princeton Seminary played in shaping nineteenth-century America itself. Calhoun cites William McLoughlin as writing, “The story of American evangelicalism is the story of America itself in the years 1800-1900.” Significantly, Princeton was at the center of American evangelical thought.

The Threat to Princeton’s Life and Influence

The Bible was the message of Old Princeton, and the Westminster Confession of Faith was the faithful expression of the Bible’s teaching. Despite intellectual challenges to historic Christianity, the nineteenth century ended with a spirit of optimism. Princeton graduates were carrying the gospel around the world and planting new churches from coast to coast in America. In the church, an earlier division of conservatives and progressives had been worked through after the Civil War so that there had been a generation of peace by the turn of the century.

Most of the progressive “new schoolers,” however, had been trained at institutions more theologically liberal than Princeton. Their influence in the church showed up by 1903 when, contrary to the Princeton tradition, amendments to the Confession of Faith were passed that
reflected a more universal and sanguine understanding of God’s plan of salvation.

This development is often taken as a “hand-writing-on-the-wall” kind of event. By 1910 and in subsequent years the General Assembly found itself forced to pass a statement of “fundamentals” that were necessary tenets of orthodoxy in examining ministers for ordination.

The leavening influence of liberalism grew. It finally burst out in reaction against having to abide by the five fundamentals. In 1924 almost thirteen hundred ministers retreated to Auburn, New York, after that year’s general assembly of the PCUSA. Site of one of the New School’s most progressive seminaries, they fixed their names to the infamous Auburn Affirmation, repudiating as “theories” such historic fundamentals as Christ’s virgin birth and His bodily resurrection.

Within three years a controlling liberal element that was tolerant of its modernistic members sat in the driver’s seat of the PCUSA. It declared that the General Assembly could not establish “essential and necessary” articles of belief for ordination. The Auburn tradition was in. The Princeton tradition was out.

Princeton Seminary’s articulation and defense of Reformed theology had been a dynamic force in the life of the Presbyterian Church. After the liberal-modernist coalition came to power in the Assembly, it moved to crush opposition from the historic forces that had been preserving orthodoxy. From Alexander to Machen, Princeton had been in the vanguard of the defense. It was the first target.

J. Gresham Machen, Princeton’s professor of New Testament and a leading apologist for the purity of the church, had not been silent in the battle to save historic Presbyterianism. He was out of the country when he heard a report on the actions of the Assembly of 1927, and he knew the growing trend was not good. With broad insight he summarized that assembly as “…probably the most disastrous meeting, from the point of view of evangelical Christianity, that has been held in the whole history of our Church.”

Since it was under the authority of the General Assembly, Princeton Seminary owed its life and direction to the denomination. Still it would not be easy for the new demagogues to strangle such a monumental voice as Princeton. In a deft political move, however, measures introduced in that fatal 1927 Assembly to combine the board of Trustees with the Board of Directors were approved in the 1929 Assembly. The leadership of the new Board was stacked against Princeton’s historic tradition and against her conservative faculty.

The old Princeton Tradition was dying at Princeton. The reorganized board did not immediately jettison the school’s historic confessional Calvinism. Rather, the board broadened the curriculum to make the old message one of several choices on the theological smorgasbord. The Princeton Tradition of the Hodges and Warfields would give way to the faddish theologies of Barth, Brunner, and later Tillich.

In 1929 when Machen founded Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, he was not just
trying to preserve a tradition. Rather, he was working to preserve the church by holding to “the faith once delivered to the saints.” The Princeton Tradition embodied the clearest expression of the faith in its loyal teaching of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Hence the name for the new seminary that would preserve what was lost at Princeton.

Carrying the Torch

Thankfully, God has raised up other faithful seminaries over the years that have identified with the old Princeton Tradition. Over a dozen such schools over the last 60 years have taken their place among Princeton’s godly retinue.

Western Reformed Seminary was established in 1983 and took the Westminster Confession of Faith as its doctrinal statement. Its textbooks? Besides Calvin’s Institutes, WRS’s faculty and students digest the works of Charles and A. A. Hodge, Miller, Warfield, and Machen. WRS teaches its students the history of Princeton and of Machen’s valiant fight against apostasy.

**Conclusion**

For more than 100 years Princeton Seminary was faithful to the Word of God. That divine Word shaped the ministries of its staff and students, and ultimately of generations in America and beyond. With simplicity British pastor Charles Spurgeon declared, “Oh, for more Princeton theology, for it is the teaching of the Word of God.”

Caspar Wistar Hodge imbibed the spirit of his father and of Princeton. His words summarize the vision of the Princeton tradition:

> The majestic testimony of the church in all time is that its advances in spiritual life have always been toward and not away from the Bible, and in proportion to the reverence for, and power of realizing in practical life, the revealed Word.

> “Faith and learning” were the watchwords of balance at Princeton Seminary. Western Reformed Seminary hopes to capture and convey the same message in its biblical motto, “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24).

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3 Samuel Miller admonished his pastoral colleagues at Princeton’s inauguration, “We have slumbered until the scarcity of labourers in our harvest has become truly alarming!” (Cited in David Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary: Faith and Learning*, p. 33.) Besides the vast mission field of the frontier, there were more than 400 established churches that lacked pastors.
4 Not surprisingly, Patrick Henry had claimed Alexander’s father-in-law as the model for his own fiery oratory.
5 In A.A. Hodge’s *The Life of Charles Hodge*.
10 Cited in Calhoun, *Princeton II*, p. 379; emphasis added is mine.
11 At the beginning of the 1800s there was a dearth of Bibles in the new world; the Church of England controlled the British publication of the Bible, ostensibly cutting off any exportation to the U.S. Not surprisingly, Alexander and
Miller each had belonged to Bible societies, Alexander in Philadelphia and Miller in New York City. Early in his tenure Charles Hodge organized at Princeton the Society for Improvement in Biblical Literature for the translation and exegesis of the Scriptures.