

American Presbyterian Church History

1800's

“The times were such as tried men’s souls; but these men’s souls and the souls of their companions triumphed through the trials of those days. The seed of American Protestantism was sown in a New England blizzard. Its Presbyterian type sprouted in a Philadelphia spring snow. It shot its stalk upward in a New Jersey midwinter Sabbath ordination. It blossomed amid the tempest of the Revolution. It “set its fruit” in the Great Revival of 1800. The world is now reaping its harvest in the missionary heat of these midsummer years with their millions of money and tens of thousands of native converts.” —Hayes, (1892), p. 122

I. An Era of expansion and organization

A. Westward expansion to the Mississippi

1. Causes

- a. Congestion on eastern seaboard; only 5% of population across the mountains in 1790
- b. Post-war recession aggravated by British embargo (1808-1820)

2. New population concentrations challenge

- a. Eastern depletions drop attendance
- b. Western boom creates church planting opportunities

- by 1821, NY surpasses VA as #1; OH and KY rank 5th and 6th; 25 states now, 10 of the 12 new ones being west of Alleghenies

3. Head start for Presbyterians: Scotch Irish already on the western edge of the population

a. Redstone, PA

b. Augusta and Hanover Counties of VA (+ NC frontier) spread into TN and KY (see Posey. *The Presbyterian Church of the Old SW*)

c. Father David Rice, father of Presbyterianism in KY in 1780's

(1) started Danville church as nucleus

(2) 1785-1802 = 3 presbyteries culminates in Synod of KY

(2) Separate Cumberland Presbytery joins later

B. 1801 Plan of Union between Congregationalists and Presbyterians

1. Essence: ecclesiastical form was subordinated to Christian effort in response to the need of planting new churches on the burgeoning frontier

“The Plan of Union was an ingenious arrangement making it possible for congregations to be connected with both the Congregational and the Presbyterian denominations at the same time, and to be served by pastors of either. Presbyterian churches might be represented in the Congregational associations by their elders, while Congregational churches could be represented in the presbyteries by committeemen. Disputed cases might be referred either to presbytery or to a special council.” —Loetscher, p. 85

2. Background

a. Continuing effort at Calvinistic cooperation out of the Great Awakening which had been interrupted by the War

b. Proposed for western missions to the CT Association by Presbyterian Jonathan Edwards the Younger in 1800

c. Agreed to by Gen'l Assembly in 1801 and unanimously adopted by CT Association in 1802

3. After 1826, the Plan was executed by the independent American Home Mission Society

4. Ramifications for the two denominations

a. Worked to the advantage of Presbyterians: more new churches join them than Congs.

(1) Presbyterians better organized and more assertive

(2) Presbyterian gov't afforded more protection to its pastors in volatile frontier situations

(3) Organic unity of the presbytery gave scattered frontiersmen a greater sense of homogeneity

b. Worked to the disadvantage of Presbyterianism; polity challenged by notions of independency and purity diluted by New Haven theology

“In an evil day, the Presbyterian church paused in the development of her distinctive principles, and formed an alliance with New England Congregationalism; which in the third of one century brought her to the brink of her ruins.” —B.M. Palmer. *The Life and Letters of James H. Thornwell*, p.188

“Churches, Presbyteries, and finally Synods were born of it; which, like Jacob’s cattle, were ringstreaked, speckled, and grizzled’—a motley assemblage with every hue and color of the ecclesiastical prism.” —Palmer, p. 193

- See Palmer, p. 195, for the 1837 Assembly Memorial detailing the perceived threat of heretical infection from N.E.

“History does not afford a better illustration of the evil wrought by good men, whenever from motives of policy, they swerve from principle. *** This [‘Illiad of Woes’] was not established by good men, but it originated in the sweetest and most godly intentions.” —Palmer, p. 191

5. Discontinuation of the Plan

a. 1837 - rejected by Old School Presbyterians

b. 1852 - Congregationalists face reality and bail out

C. Otherwise, relatively slow growth of Presbyterianism on the Frontier

1. Competition from Methodists (better organized for growth) and Baptists (lower standards for leadership)

2. Reasons for slower expansion

a. Professional clergymen dependent on support of their new church(es)

b. Many ministers forced to divide time as school teachers

c. Bureaucratic procedures of “calling” a minister

“Presbyterian ministers called, Methodists sent, and Baptists simply came”

d. Limited manpower; slow educational/preparation process

e. More rigid in methodological adaptability

f. Messages were heavy on theology with less emotional appeal

Later writers found incongruity between Calvinism and frontier religious ideas. Theodore Roosevelt was convinced that Calvinism was too cold for the frontiersman. In seeking an explanation of the failure of Presbyterians to appeal to 'crackers, red necks,' and the great unchurched element in the new cotton states, William E. Dodd stated that 'the Calvinist meat was too strong' and 'Princeton faith too drastic.' —Posey. *The Presbyterian Church in the Old SW* p.48 (cf. p. 21).

g. Ethnic myopia

h. Temptations ... common to man

D. Early Presbyterian schools in an effort to meet the challenge of supplying leadership

1. Father Rice's log college grows into Transylvania Seminary

a. Given 12,000 acre grant from state legislature

b. Shanghaied by Unitarians

1) 1794 - Presbytery establishes substitute orthodox Kentucky Academy

a) Condition that 1/2 of Trustees must be Presbt. ministers

b) Another grant of 6,000 acres from the state

2) 1798 - Transv. Seminary, on hard times, invites Presbyterian control when it merges with another school to become Transylvania University; soon goes liberal again

2. Princeton Seminary, 1812

a. Assembly Propositions to Presbyteries: a central seminary, a Northern and a Southern seminary, or a seminary for each synod?

b. Assembly commissions Archibald Alexander, the first Professor

1) 1807 Assembly moderator, he had preached on need for a seminary

2) A student of William Graham, Witherspoon's disciple

3) As Prof. of Didactic and Polemic Theology, he was joined the next year by Samuel

Miller in practical theology

- c. Started with 3 students and grew to 14 the next year
- d. Princeton serves as a counterweight to the N.E. theology out of Yale

II. Second Great Awakening, ca. 1800-1825

A. Eastern phase

1. Centered mainly in college towns along the coast: Hampden Sydney in VA (1787), Dartmouth, Yale (1802)

2. An orderly revival producing lasting fruits

B. Western Awakening: less sophisticated

1. Led by Presbyterians; harvested by Baptists and Methodists

2. James McGready

“He has been described as exceedingly uncouth in his personal appearance, with small piercing eyes, coarse tremulous voice, and so unusual was his general ugliness as to attract attention.” –Henry Swete, p. 227

a. Educated in W. PA Log College

b. Pastored three Presbyterian churches in Logan County, KY, (a.k.a. “Rogues’ Harbor”)

(1) “Religious decline is a judgment”

(2) Congregations prayed each Sat. night and Sunday morning and every 3rd Saturday for revival

c. Local opposition: accused of “driving people to distraction”

d. Leader of Cumberland Revival, 1800: spontaneous creation of camp meetings

3. Barton Stone

a. Arminian revivalist who would later renounce his Presbyterianism to found the “Christian Church”

b. Carried camp meeting style revival to his churches

c. Stone withdraws from the Synod of KY, 1803

- (1) Mental reservations regarding the doctrines of Dordt
- (2) Stone and four other Presbyterian ministers form the “Independent Springfield Presbytery”
- (3) KY Synod suspended the five ministers and declared their pulpits vacant

C. Fractured Presbyterianism

1. “The Christian Church”

- a. Antinomian result of the Springfield Presbytery
- b. Barton Stone credited with its paternity after the other four ministers bail out
- c. 1832: general merger of the Christian Church (Stonites) with the Disciples of Christ (Campbellites)

2. “The Disciples of Christ”

- a. Thomas Campbell and his son, Alexander, defect from the Associate Reformed Presbyterians of western PA in 1809
 - (1) Rejection of confessionalism
 - (2) Alexander was 17 years with the Baptists after his application to the Pittsburgh Synod was rejected
- b. The 1832 merger with the Stonites leaves confusion over the new name: “Disciples of Christ” or “Christian Church”?

3. Cumberland Presbyterian Church

- a. 1802: Cumberland Presbytery in KY out of revival influx
- b. This presbytery licenses ill-equipped “catechizers”
 - (1) Circuit system
 - (2) 17 “illiterate exhorters with Arminian sentiments”
- c. Kentucky Synod aroused by “defective, discordant, and obscure [minutes], abounding in flagrant violations of the Rules of Discipline”

d. Synod quasi-commission aggressively prosecutes irregularities

(1) Cumberland Presbytery dissolved

(2) 1809 appeal to General Assembly was denied

e. Development

(1) 1810: Independent Presbytery

(2) 1829: General Assembly of 18 presbyteries

(3) Success: camp meetings, circuit system, and “free will” appeals

D. Revivalist and democratic challenges to orthodoxy

1. Taylorism

a. Nathaniel Taylor out of Yale

1) Influenced by Scottish Common Sense Realism: “how can I be guilty for the sin of my parents?”

2) Denied original sin and total depravity

“sin is in the sinning” and “sin is not necessary, but inevitable”

3) Influences Congregationalism that is cooperating in the 1801 Plan of Union

2. Finneyism

a. Charles Grandison Finney (1793- 1875)

1) Father of modern revivalism

2) Ordained to Presbyterian ministry in 1824

a) Lawyer with slim theological training

b) Became Congregationalist by 1832

b. Finney’s “New Measures”

1) Based on humanistic perspective instead of the Spirit’s supernat’l involvement in revivals

2) Madison Avenue publicity

3) Protracted nightly meetings

4) Women exhorters

5) “Anxious Bench”

c. Princeton’s response

“When this exciting system of calling to “anxious seats,”—calling out into the aisles to be “prayed for,” etc., is connected, as, to my certain knowledge, it often has been, with erroneous doctrines:--for example, with the declaration that nothing is easier, than conversion:--that the power of the Holy Spirit is not necessary to enable impenitent sinners to repent and believe;—that if they only resolve to be for God—resolve to be Christians—that itself is regeneration—the work is already done:--I say, where the system of “anxious seats,” etc., is connected with such doctrinal statements as these, it appears to be adapted to destroy souls wholesale.” –Samuel Miller as cited in *History of Christianity in America*, p. 229

II. Presbyterian Growth, Splits, and Reunion (1830-1870)

A. Increased growth, 1815-1835

1. 41 Presbyteries to 118
2. 600% membership growth
3. Six new seminaries, including Auburn, (1821), the New School counterpart to Princeton

B. Early Tensions

1. Fear of losing it’s Presbyterian polity
 - a. 1830—New England Congregationalists relegated to “Corresponding Members,” losing their franchise held since 1794
 - b. 1832—“Committeemen” from Presbygational Plan of Union Churches must come to the Assembly as “elders”
2. Threat of creeping doctrinal apostasy
 - a. Taylorism in many Plan of Union churches
 - b. Finney’s methodology and anthropology
 - c. Test cases: Heresy trials
 - 1) George Duffield: his presbytery in Penn. condemned his erroneous, dispensational views found in his book, *Regeneration*
 - 2) Lyman Beecher (1835) of Lane Seminary and the Second Presbyterian Church in Cinn.

Acquitted of Heresy
Slander
Hypocrisy

3) Albert Barnes (1798-1870)

a) Objections over his published sermon, “The Way of Salvation.” Sustained by the Assembly in 1831

b) Heresy charges over his *Notes on Romans* (viz., Romans 5). Acquitted by presbytery, condemned by Synod, acquitted by 1836 Assembly

3. Jealous opposition to parachurch groups like AHMS and the ABCFM

4. Polarization evidenced by “elective affinity” wherein liberal and orthodox presbyteries occupy the same geographic region

5. Summary

“The prospect of [an internal] division was greatly increased by the fact that the dividing lines on all these different question seemed to be found at about the same place, [viz., the Plan of Union] and the same leaders were found on the same side of most questions.” –Hays, p. 176

C. A Parting of Company

1. Schools of thought

a. Old School

1) Reformed Confessionalism; doctrinal emphasis while encouraging true revival

2) Composition: European Reformed and Scotch-Irish

b. New School

1) Catholic/Evangelical Presbyterians: ethical emphasis

2) Composition: NE Puritans and frontier revivalists

2. 1835 Assembly = Old School control

“The errors abroad in the church are fundamental, vital, and systematic.... Another alarming feature is the boldness and pertinacity with which the very existence of these errors is denied.” –Act and Testimonies, VIII, as cited in Hutchinson’s *HBRPCEs*, p. 132.

3. 1836 – New School Control of Pittsburgh Assembly

4. 1837 – Old School has majority and mobilizes

a. Plan of Union abrogated

1) Independent agencies disowned

2) 1838, new Assembly Boards are formed, e.g., Western Foreign Mission Society out of

the Pittsburgh Assembly

b. Erstwhile attempt at amicable separation into 2 churches

c. Abrogation of Plan of Union made retroactive

- 1) Excision of: 4 synods
28 presbyteries
509 ministers
60,000 members

“We do no man injustice by declaring that Congregationalists are not Presbyterians....”

Cited in Hutchinson, p. 136

2) Other sympathetic new schoolers withdraw in support of cast-out brethren

a) 4/9 of the PCUSA was New School

b) The New School remnant is repressed in 1838

“...our constitutional rights, individual rights, and rights of appeal have been violated...”

5. Six points of contention (per E.D. Morris in *The PCNS: 1837-1869*, as cited in Hutchinson, p. 136)

a. Doctrinal discipline

b. Extent of subscription to the confession

c. Polity

d. Ecclesiastical agencies

e. Revival methods

f. Slavery

6. Significant representative documents

a. Old School: "Testimony and Memorial," 1837

"We contend especially and above all for the truth...."

16 specification of error within the church, e.g., areas of original sin, vicarious atonement, free will, semi-Pelagianism

b. New School: "Auburn Declaration," 1837

1) Protestation of its Presbyterian and Calvinistic character

2) Rebuttal of the 16 accusations

3) Cf. the 1924 Auburn Affirmation

Although a somewhat ambiguous statement, "This extraordinary party ... after doing so much to destroy the church and corrupt its faith, they drew up and recorded a confession not only at direct variance with their own published declarations, but more orthodox than many who dreaded and opposed them ever held." –R.J. Breckinridge to 1842 GA

7. Immediate good out of the split

a. OS vitality

b. NS Presbyterian renaissance

1) Denominational boards by 1852

2) Estrangement from Congregationalists

D. North-South schisms

1. New School

a. Slow growth

b. Early low profile on radical abolitionism

c. 1846, the main issue

d. 1850, Detroit resolution calling for discipline of slave holding members; reaffirmed in 1852

e. 1857

1) Lexington, MO, Presbytery notifies synod its elders held slaves out of principle

2) Assembly response: “such doctrines and practices cannot be permanently tolerated in the Presbyterian Church.”

3) Southern Synods secede to form The United Synod of the Presbyterian Church

2. Old School

a. Doubled size and increased giving 10 fold in 33 years

b. Positions on slavery

1) Abolitionists

2) Moderates (Princeton)

3) Conservatives (Southerners)

c. 1845 resolution eschewing slavery but declaring it should not debar any from the church: vote of 168-13

d. 1861 Philadelphia Assembly

1) Five weeks after Ft. Sumter; many other denominations had already split

2) Dr. Gardiner Spring moves that a committee “inquire into the expediency of making some expression of devotion to the Union of these states”

3. Gardiner Spring Resolutions

a. Pass 156-66 with a signed protest of minority

b. Southern commissioners withdraw to form the Presbyterian Church in the C.S.A

1) Only 13 Southerners in attendance

2) Yet 1/3 of O.S. lost for more than a century

E. Reunions

1. South

a. N.S. never had a big southern following or schools to train its leaders

b. Merges into PCCSA

2. North

a. Backdrop

- 1) Reunion of 1758
- 2) Time of national healing in the north
- 3) O.S. and N.S. now equal in size after southern exodus
- 4) Independent agencies no longer a bone of contention

b. Early peace overtures

- 1) 1862, O.S. at Columbus calls for exchange of observers to N.S. Assembly
- 2) 1864, O.S. delegates from Newark attend unofficial joint convention

c. Early cooperation

- 1) Joint philanthropic work among union soldiers
- 2) Joint reconstruction efforts

d. Culmination

- 1) 1867 Presbyterian National Union Convention
 - a) Pushed by laymen
 - b) Scant resistance on either side
- 2) 1869 joint meeting in Pittsburg; both bodies vote to reunite
- 3) 1870, reunion at First United Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia

III. Other Presbyterian & Reformed Developments of the latter 1800s

A. Dutch

1. 1846 – Dutch Reformed Church joined by conservative seceders from Holland
 - a. 1857 – many of the new immigrants bail out to form the “Christian Reformed Church”
 - b. 1886 – a second, larger secession from Holland beefs up the CRC
2. 1867 – Dutch Reformed Church changes its name to the RCA

B. Southern Presbyterianism

1. Civil War revivals among the troops: see Dabney's *Christ in the Camp*
2. Distinctive emphases
 - a. Standing executive committees vs. Northern boards
 - b. Greater homogeneity between ruling and teaching elders
 - c. Greater autonomy in lower ecclesiastical levels
3. Polarization from the North
 - a. Ecclesiastical carpetbagging — 1865 Assembly
 - 1) Southern ministers still on the national rolls
 - 2) Required to confess
 - a) the sin of secession
 - b) the sin of slavery
 - 3) The South was declared a mission field
 - b. Many churches in the border states join the P.C.U.S. in reaction to northern legalism
 - c. Southern churches opposed the O.S./N.S. reunion of 1869
4. Southern schools
 - a. Union Seminary in Virginia; Robert Dabney
 - b. Columbia Seminary in SC; J.H. Thornwell and Girardeau
 - c. Louisville and Austin came in early 1900s

C. Scottish Presbyterians

1. 1782 – Majority of the Covenanters and Seceders unite into the Associate Reformed Presbyterians
2. 1858 – Balance of Assoc. Presbyterian Church joins ARPC to form United Presbyterian Church in North America

3. Western Pennsylvania and border states were center of Scotch Presbyterian strength

4. Scottish distinctives till 1925

- a. closed communion
- b. Exclusion of lodge members
- c. Exclusive Psalm singing

D. Western missions

1. Marcus (b. 1802) and Narcissa Whitman (both died in Nov. 1847)

- a. Presbyterian doctor from Boston serving under the ABCFM
- b. Murdered with 15 others at Walla Walla by the Cayuse Indians

2. Sheldon Jackson (1834-1909)

- a. Princeton graduate
- b. Director of Western Missions, 1870-1882
 - 1) Introduced prefabricated church buildings
 - 2) Introduced reindeer from Siberia into Alaska, 1892
- c. 1897 – Moderator of General Assembly

E. Higher critical convulsions

1. Charles Augustus Briggs, (1814-1913)

- a. Trained at Union Seminary and Univ. of Berlin
- b. Prof. of Hebrew, and later of Biblical Theology, at Union Seminary, NYC

c. Anti-Calvinist sentiments

“These definition [Westminster Canons] have ever been regarded as hard and offensive, and ... they have kept multitudes from uniting with the Presbyterian Church.” –cited in Hutchinson, p. 159.

“The old Calvinism is fast dying out.... We need a theology and a confession that will prepare the way for the great work of the future—the reunion of Christendom in the creed of Christ.” –Schaff in Hutchinson, p. 160.

d. Challenge of the Scripture’s inerrancy, 1891

1) Inaugural address in taking the chair of Biblical Theology: challenged Princeton's "dogma of inspiration" as bibliolatry

2) *The Authority of Scripture*

e. Heresy trial, 1891-93

1) Acquitted by NY Presbytery, but convicted by G.A.

"The General Assembly would remind all under its care that it is a fundamental doctrine that the Old and New Testaments are the inspired and infallible Word of God. Our Church holds that the inspired Word, as it came from God, is without error. The assertion of the contrary cannot but shake the confidence of the people in the sacred Books. All who enter office in our Church solemnly profess to receive them as the only infallible rule of faith and practice. If they change their belief on this point, Christian honor demands that they should withdraw from out ministry. They have no right to use the pulpit or the chair of the professor for the dissemination of their errors until they are dealt with by the slow process of discipline. But if any do so act, their Presbyteries should speedily interpose, and deal with them for violation of ordination vows." -1892 G.A. Deliverance meeting in Portland, cited in Hutchinson, p. 164-165.

2) 87 Presbyters sign official protest vs. conviction

3) Broken affiliations

a) Briggs joins Episcopaleans

b) Union Seminary cuts its ties to the PCUSA

2. Henry Preserved Smith (d. 1927)

a. Another product of the Univ. of Berlin

b. Denied infallibility of Scriptures, but not tried till expressing sympathy with Briggs in 1892

c. Removed from Lane Seminary professorship; ultimately landed at Union Seminary, NYC, 1913-1925.

3. Arthur Cushman McGiffert (d. 1933)

a. Renowned historical theologian

b. Left Lane Seminary to succeed Schaff at Union, NYC, in 1893

c. Became Congregationalist when indicted in 1899 for his denial of original sin