

HISTORICAL BACKGROUNDS OF THE BIBLE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Introduction

Life's developments often come in pairs of opposites. The antithesis can be illustrated by the Reformed Churches coming out of Roman Catholicism, it might be told as the tale of two cities, or it might manifest itself in the modern two-party political system.

Sacred history especially reveals life's tensions between rivals: the knowledge of good and of evil, the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, Cain and Abel, the sons of God and the daughters of men, plus many more examples from the patriarchal narratives. Sarah drove out Hagar to protect her son, Isaac from Ishmael, Leah competed with Rachel for attentions from their husband, and even before the birth of a set of fraternal twins, Jacob was striving with brother Esau in the womb.

Early Tensions in American Presbyterianism

Official Presbyterianism had a good start in colonial America. Francis Mackemie was a gifted and energetic church planter sent from Ulster in 1683 to gather the scattered Presbyterian sheep in the new world. By 1706 he had organized a presbytery, and the first synod by 1716. The future was bright for a Presbyterian witness to the Reformed faith in the Anglican church world of early America.

The Father of American Presbyterianism was in heaven before he could see his spiritual children begin to struggle over the family estate. In 1729 the first critical test to the unity of American Presbyterianism developed over the question of doctrinal subscription. In the face of the threat of Socinianism (anti-trinitarianism) and deism spreading from Europe, Scotch-Irish immigrants insisted that church officers must swear to uphold every element of the Westminster Confession. On the other hand, Presbyterians of English stock, while concerned for uniform orthodoxy, called for fealty to the "system of doctrine" contained in the Confession. This would allow for mental reservations based on personal biblical convictions to be stated by a (potential or present) church officer so that his appeal could be determined by his own presbytery. English Presbyterianism had a longer history in the new world and had already been enjoying decades of freedom of conscience and self-determination; in the 1600s many English Presbyterians had fled to the Middle Colonies to escape the suffocating structures of New England Congregationalism.

A compromise was struck to reach the Adopting Act of 1729. Within a dozen years, however, the underlying fissure within American Presbyterianism erupted in a divorce. The Great Awakening placed stress on all non-conformist (viz., non-Anglican) church groups, precipitating institutional soul-searching. The conservatives of the Scotch-Irish tradition

collected in what became known as the Old Side; the revivalist Presbyterians who tutored their future pastors in “log colleges” to keep up with the harvest of revival souls were called the New Side.

Thankfully, both sides were Christian enough to forgive past grievances, and Presbyterian enough to want a united witness. They were re-united almost a generation before America’s Revolutionary War, and after supporting the war effort the unified Presbyterian Church became a leading national church.

Growing Pains

The Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. adopted its national constitution in 1789. It was the era of federalism, and Presbyterians were anxious to grow with the new country. To keep up with westward expansion, a cooperative agreement was arranged in 1801 between Presbyterians and Congregationalists to supply empty pulpits. There had been a history of cooperation between the two bodies before the war, and with the 1801 Plan of Union they readily agreed to share congregations and pastors in the noble enterprise of home missions.

For practical reasons the Presbyterian Church advanced more quickly in the bargain than their partners—on the desolate frontier most pastors preferred the protections and fellowship afforded by a presbytery over the local, democratic whims of the congregational system. While Presbyterians gained pastors and congregations faster than Congregationalists, there was a huge disadvantage.

Many of the Congregational pastors trained in New England who were becoming Presbyterian were infected with the heretical New Haven Theology. This was not a problem in 1801, but by 1830 the western presbyteries were becoming tolerant of a semi-Pelagianism that taught “...sin is not necessary, but it is inevitable.” This was an outright denial of original sin that offered an optimistic perspective on human nature. Optimism in human nature reflected the dangerous view of itinerant evangelists like Charles Finney that revivals did not come by the supernatural intervention of God’s Spirit, but by the right use of psychological means. Frontier churches were being filled by the dead wood of “easy believism,” led by Arminian Presbyterian pastors.

Conservative, “Old School” Presbyterians began to mobilize in the 1830s to preserve their church. Efforts had been taken to purge out the leaven through the normal channels of church discipline at the presbytery level. Celebrated ecclesiastical trials seemed to galvanize “New School” opposition.

Conservatives loyal to the Westminster Confession and to Presbyterian polity believed radical measures were called for. They barely missed achieving majority control of the national assembly in 1836; the next year, however, they had the votes necessary to take drastic action. They abrogated the 1801 Plan of Union and retroactively dismissed any churches that had come into the Presbyterian communion under the plan. All told, four western synods comprised of 28

presbyteries, 509 ministers, and 60,000 communicants were summarily stripped from their denomination.

Reunion of Estranged Brothers

Other denominations also were unraveling in this era, primarily over the issue of slavery that would rend the nation. After the Civil War there was a general spirit of healing. Every American denomination had been fractured by the political turmoil, and many were swift to reunite after the war. While Southern Presbyterians were not ready to be received back into the national assembly, the new school divorcee sought rapprochement with her former denomination. After all, there was the precedent of the Old Side–New Side reunion of 90 years earlier.

While some, like Charles Hodge, cautioned against the reunion, the Old School–New School re-marriage became official in 1870. Both sides had always held to the inspiration and authority of Scripture, and the chastened New School had begun to guard its gates of entry into the ministry when it was spurned in 1837.

The PCUSA was invigorated by the reunion. Growth accelerated through the end of the 1800s. The denomination was militant against the rationalism of higher criticism as manifested in the heresy trial of Union Seminary professor, Charles Briggs, for his denial of the inspiration of the Scriptures. On the moral issue of the liquor trade, the Old School had passed an 1865 resolution recommending that ministers “...enjoin total abstinence upon the youth of the Church;”¹ the reunited body in 1877 passed an earlier New School statement promoting “...total abstinence from everything that may intoxicate [as] ‘the only principle of temperance.’”²

In 1903 some of Charles Hodge’s earlier fears for the future began to surface as a few New School chickens came home to roost. That year the national assembly approved changes to the Westminster Confession that softened its Calvinism. The church was broadening, as evidenced three years later by the admittance of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, historically sympathetic to Arminianism. Biblical truth was diluted to accommodate diverse perspectives.

Sadly, by 1910 the national assembly found itself defining “five fundamentals,”³ beliefs essential for ordination into the Presbyterian ministry. What never before had been an issue was suddenly the burning issue that would determine whether the PCUSA would police itself to thwart the growing threat of modernism. Twice more the assembly would ratify the “five fundamentals.” However, in 1927 the national assembly effectively jettisoned the fundamentals by concluding that it could not set minimal standards for admission to the various presbyteries. The 1924 Auburn Affirmation, a protest statement subscribed by more than 1,200 modernist presbyters that labeled the “five fundamentals” as mere theories, was allowed to stand. The PCUSA was broadening beyond historic Christianity to the point of no return.

A Succession of “American Presbyterianism”

After the 1927 Presbyterian assembly, concerned conservatives were all of a sudden in the minority in the PCUSA. In the wake of a series of ecclesiastical trials against them by the liberal bureaucratic machine, the Bible Presbyterian Church came into existence ten years later.

The Bible Presbyterian Church often has been compared to the Presbyterian New School tradition. More than a comparison, there is a patently clear historical link. From the 19th century New School tradition the 20th century Bible Presbyterian Church inherited emphases like the following:

1. A patriotic nationalism⁴ as opposed to the Old School’s emphasis on the superiority of Christ’s present spiritual kingdom. While not denying Christ’s present spiritual kingdom, premillennial BPs look for the consummation of God’s plan in Christ’s messianic kingdom and beyond. They can hardly be accused of being pessimistic ostriches with their heads in the sand as they practice a spirit of “occupying until Christ comes”;
2. Involvement in national moral reforms. Key concerns for the New School of the 1800s were abolition and prohibition, and for the BPC it has been the latter issue;
3. A general preference for doing the work of the church through independent agencies rather than denominational boards or commissions;⁵
4. A willing desire to cooperate with other conservative denominations outside of our confessional tradition,⁶ especially in efforts to counterbalance apostate and compromising church bodies; and
5. Revivalism, the hallmark of the New School. BPs have always made a conscious effort to appeal in preaching to unregenerate hearts, and have occasionally used evangelistic rallies. There has been a move away from “altar calls” that shift the focus from the work of God’s Spirit to the decision of the troubled sinner. Of late there also has been an effort to balance revivalism with an emphasis on covenantalism. The biblical promises of the covenant as articulated in the Westminster Confession emphasize God’s dealing, not just with individuals, but with families, and corporate spiritual families (congregations).

Another Thread in the Tapestry

Yet the BPC is not the product solely of the New School tradition. There are also similarities to the Old School. First of all, the BPC is a confessional church. It cherishes the Westminster Confession⁷ and insists on systematically teaching the Confession and Catechisms. At the founding of the denomination there may have been some elements of dispensational theology; in recent years the BPs passed a synodical resolution disapproving dispensationalism.

Secondly, the BPC has always required a thorough and exacting education for its ministers. In line with the Princeton Seminary tradition, BP seminary students have had a steady diet of Calvin’s *Institutes*, Charles Hodge’s *Systematic Theology*, and studies of the Westminster Confession. While many modern theological institutions have dropped Hebrew requirements

and eviscerated their Greek programs, BPs have always required extensive study of Hebrew and Greek to prepare their ministers as independent exegetes of the Word.

The Bible Presbyterian Church does have some roots in the Princeton tradition. While Princeton Seminary was aligned with the Presbyterian Old School, it often took a mediating position between the Old and New Schools.⁸ With regard to revivalism, the professors supported biblical revival and evangelism that was God-centered. Archibald Alexander, Princeton's first professor, was himself an itinerant Presbyterian evangelist in Virginia in the late 1700s. Also of interest is the fact that Princeton, traditionally postmillennial in eschatology, produced several notable preachers and educators who were premillennial.⁹ The lines between the Old and New traditions were not always clearly drawn, and Princeton Seminary generally reflected the best of both schools.

Conclusion

The Bible Presbyterian Form of Government (2:4) states "The Bible Presbyterian Church declares itself to be a branch of the catholic visible Church of Christ and further declares its willingness to hold Christian fellowship with all other such branches of the Church." This is not a New School sentiment but a true expression of biblical Christianity.

With the demise of mainline Presbyterianism, founders of the Bible Presbyterian Church claimed to represent the continuing succession of "American Presbyterianism." God used a small Gideon's band to help preserve a glorious and godly heritage of this branch of Christ's Church.

¹ George Hutchinson, *The History behind the RPCES*, p. 143.

² George Marsden, "Perspectives on the Division of 1937," in *Pressing toward the Mark*, p. 300.

³ The five fundamentals were 1) Inerrancy of the Bible, 2) the virgin birth and deity of Jesus Christ, 3) the doctrine of substitutionary atonement, 4) the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, 5) the miracles of Jesus Christ.

⁴ Bible Presbyterians will remember the famous Washington, DC, "Marches for Victory" of the early 1970s.

⁵ The boards of most independent agencies used by the BPC traditionally have been comprised of BP ministers and elders. In recent years, the BP Synod has been holding its agencies accountable by requiring annual financial and activity reports.

⁶ While New School Presbyterians never had a penchant for fighting apostasy or heresy, they did have an ecumenical spirit in their early cooperation with Congregationalism.

⁷ The first synod of the BPC amended the Confession and Larger Catechism to reflect a premillennial view of Christ's return.

⁸ Examples of historic Princeton's mediating position were its positions on slavery and the temperance movement. See David B. Calhoun's two volume work, *Princeton Seminary: Faith and Learning/The Majestic Testimony*, for the best history of Princeton Seminary.

⁹ Elijah Craven (d. 1908) was a noted, non-dispensational premillennialist who served as Assembly moderator in 1885. Famous premillennial conference speakers were James Brookes and Nathaniel West. All three of these ministers identified with the Old School tradition (per Marsden note, p. 324).