

# **PRESBYTERIANISM IN AMERICA**

## **The Nineteenth Century: The Formative Years**

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### **Introduction**

Presbyterians in America organized on a national level at the same time the U.S. Constitution was being hammered out in Philadelphia. The Presbyterian Church was popular for its having championed the cause of American independence. It had strong national leaders like John Witherspoon and William Graham. It now had a Book of Church Order to go with the Westminster Standards to guide it into the future. The Presbyterian Church U.S.A. was riding high as it commenced its historical journey in tandem with the new nation.

The beginning of the 1800s brought opportunities and challenges, many of which were unique to the American experience. This century saw a time of expansion and external cooperation in Presbyterianism, followed by a period of fracture and reunion. These trends paralleled and were influenced by national dynamics of westward expansion and growing sectionalism within the nation. The parallel pattern between church and state continued after the American Civil War when the mother Presbyterian church in the northern states reunited and went through a period of preserving its ecclesiastical heritage.

### **Early Presbyterian Seminaries**

At the beginning of the Presbyterian journey there was no approved school for training future leaders. Archibald Alexander, a graduate of one of the several colonial “Log Colleges,” was a leading voice of the late 1700s in calling for an American Presbyterian seminary to meet the demand of planting churches for the growing nation. The national assembly authorized a central seminary that would finally settle at Princeton, New Jersey, in 1812; and Union Theological Seminary of Virginia opened its doors in the same year. These schools were crucial for training the church’s servants in a uniform understanding of biblical Presbyterianism.

American Presbyterian seminaries, as centers of learning and reflection, also played an important role in combating American heresies and experimental excesses that came with American libertarianism. Battles with heresy always sharpen the expression of orthodoxy, and the humanism battering at the door of the 19<sup>th</sup> century church forced orthodox theologians to articulate a biblical response. The anti-supernaturalism of the period, the mushrooming cults, the attempted dilution of the Reformation doctrines, the divisive issue of slavery, and a host of other “isms” made the 1800s a very formative period in shaping American Presbyterianism.

Princeton Seminary was the flagship in articulating and defending Reformed orthodoxy through academic instruction and engagement of the issues in its scholarly journal.<sup>1</sup> Historians

suggest that Professor Charles Hodge bore monumental influence on 19<sup>th</sup> century American culture by training in the course of his career more than 2,200 Christian servants, many of whom served as influential community leaders. Before its reorganization in 1929, Old Princeton would impress its Reformed theology on more than 7,000 Christian leaders.<sup>2</sup>

## Expansion

The development of several generations over a century can make a difference in the shape and direction of the visible church. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the northern and southern Presbyterian denominations were well-established and respectable, but no longer were they the majority voice in evangelical Christianity. A hundred years of explosive expansion of Baptists and Methodists on the old frontiers had pushed America's second largest denomination in 1800 into a distant third by 1900.<sup>3</sup>

At the beginning of the 1800s Presbyterians were well positioned to grow with America. Geographically, Presbyterianism was already poised on the frontiers to plant and organize new churches. Before the Revolution the hardy Scots-Irish had already crossed the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia and the Appalachians in Pennsylvania. Not everyone on the frontier had religion, but the Scots-Irish as an ethnic group were quite loyal to the faith of their fathers. They were interested in freedom of conscience as much as in political freedom, and their population centers served as forward operating bases for Presbyterian home missions on the burgeoning frontiers of the early 1800s.

A challenge to all organized churches at the end of the 1700s was a universal coldness toward religion. The Age of Reason, at its high-water point, had just found its logical climax in the noxious excesses of the French Revolution. Infidelity was rife, even in an America that had been settled by Puritans and other religious dissidents seeking religious freedom. The siren song of humanism was calling from Europe. One observer of American Presbyterian history observed, "If French infidelity had been able to maintain a stable and quiet government in Europe, it would have nigh obliterated Christianity in this country."<sup>4</sup>

Evangelical church leaders were concerned about the spiritual temper of the era. Some presbyteries dedicated the first Tuesday of the quarter to beseech God's quickening hand in behalf of the nation and their communities. On the frontiers, especially in Kentucky, weekly fasts were observed by the faithful.

## 1801 Plan of Union

The crying need for new churches on the frontier, plus the common threat of public unbelief and godlessness, mobilized the Presbyterians and Congregationalists to work in concert in promoting the true faith. These two denominations had worked actively for American independence, and survived the struggle for nationhood as the two largest churches at the end of the Revolutionary War. In 1801 these two leading denominations, already akin through their

Reformation roots and in their theological stance, laid aside differences of polity to cooperate in the noble ideal of planting evangelical churches on the frontier.

The elements of the “1801 Plan of Union” allowed small frontier churches to belong to both denominations at the same time. When questions arose, a right of appeal could be made to either the local Congregational council or to the regional presbytery, depending on which was most practicable. These split-image congregations could call either a Presbyterian or a Congregational pastor.

Numerically, this innovation worked to the advantage of Presbyterians, who were better organized regionally and who were more assertive in their particular convictions. Pastors on an often volatile frontier liked the protections afforded by a presbytery, and isolated congregations of Christians liked the sense of larger unity in the always lonely wilderness.

The challenge for Presbyterians, which ultimately would lead to shelving the plan before it destroyed them, was a serious doctrinal infection. The disease, called New Haven Theology, began to spread in the late 1820s from the bastion of Congregationalism, Yale University. Theology professor, Nathaniel Taylor, was denying the doctrine of original sin.

Historians have posited that Taylor was working out his doctrine of sin from within a framework of Scottish Common Sense Realism.<sup>5</sup> Empirically, Taylor could not detect sin in new-born children, nor could he reasonably justify the guilt of parents being passed on to their children. He concluded that “sin is not necessary, but it is inevitable.”

This heretical departure from biblical anthropology comported well with the rugged individualism of the American frontier and with the revivalistic appeals of the likes of Charles Finney for the individual to lay aside his sin and turn over a new leaf. However, to deny original sin is to deny the biblical teaching of the inherent sin nature in humans.<sup>6</sup> To deny original guilt is to deny the legal (i.e., covenantal) unity of the race and the federal headship of Adam, leading to the denial of the federal headship of Christ in his mediation of our salvation. A departure from the orthodox doctrine of sin inevitably diminishes the offensiveness of sin, making it easier for souls to save themselves apart from God’s mercy.

Bootstrap religion and “easy believism” in some revival campaigns were the natural results of this infection invading the body of Presbyterians. The theological infection came via a transfusion tainted with an auto-immune disorder within Congregationalism. Originally intended as a neo-natal hospital to help birth and nurture new churches, the 1801 Plan of Union unwittingly was spreading disease.

The danger became apparent by the late 1820s. By then the Plan was being administered by a para church agency, the American Home Missionary Society, making it difficult for Presbyterians to change the terms of the Plan. Also, the new western churches established under the Plan, now quite numerous and leveraging significant ecclesiastical clout, were not in favor of tinkering with the Plan of 1801.

## **The Old School – New School Division**

Before the PCUSA split into two camps in the 1830s, there were harbingers of a coming divorce. The Second Great Awakening in the western territories was sweeping many souls into the church. Some of the revivals were led by faithful evangelists like Nettleton in the north, and Rice and McGready in the old Southwest. Other on-going revival efforts were of a more Arminian nature.

One of the challenges to Presbyterians was supplying enough trained pastors for the proliferating number of new congregations. The classical method of training necessitated several years of preparation for each ministerial candidate. This in itself placed the expansion of Presbyterian churches at a disadvantage to other groups. Thereupon Presbyterian ministers had to be called and installed, whereas Methodist pastors were sent, and Baptists simply came on their own.

To meet the demand for leaders, the Synod of Kentucky experimented with a Methodist approach of using laymen as exhorters and then evangelists. Many were put on a fast track to ordination. While there were gifted men among them, many showed more enthusiasm than discretion. A party within the synod began to claim that the Calvinism of the Westminster Confession was fatalistic, and some ministerial candidates expressed that particular scruple when taking ordination vows.

Realizing that a majority of men in the Cumberland Presbytery were in favor of “new measures” in revival work but against the system of doctrine of the Confession of Faith, conservatives in the Kentucky Synod took drastic measures to undo what they had spawned. Holding the majority, they dissolved the Cumberland Presbytery in 1806 and gerrymandered the rest of the boundaries of the presbyteries in order to make sure the anti-creedalists were in the minority in each presbytery. This action led to the establishment of a separate Cumberland Presbyterian Church by 1810.

While the Arminian proclivities of the revivalists in Kentucky were more overt than in other western synods,<sup>7</sup> the same ecclesiastical challenges were cropping up in new churches growing out of the 1801 Plan of Union. The end result would be the same as in Kentucky—the dissolution of church courts. Eighteenth century Presbyterians, all orthodox in doctrine, divided between Old Side and New Side. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Presbyterians went beyond disagreement over practice; vital doctrinal issues (e.g., the extent of human depravity, the decrees and providence of God) split the wings of the church into Old School and New School. The New School was known for its catholic outlook and its evangelistic and ethical emphases. The Old School remained Reformed in outlook with confessional and doctrinal emphases. Further polarization ensued from a policy of “elective affinity,” whereby churches or ministers could elect to join a presbytery of either School that overlapped its geographic region.

The ultimate divorce in 1837 was drastic: a slim Old School majority of the national assembly of the PCUSA dissolved four synods encompassing 28 presbyteries. Sixty thousand members and 509 ministers who had become Presbyterian under the 1801 Plan of Union were

excised from the denomination. Old School sentiment was, “We do no man injustice by declaring that Congregationalists are not Presbyterians.”<sup>8</sup>

The New School wing was caught by surprise. Its leaders did not have a plan of response.<sup>9</sup> Civil trials followed to no avail, one going all the way to Pennsylvania’s Supreme Court. Old Schoolers appealed to presbyteries and congregations with sincere Presbyterian sympathies to reapply for membership. On the other side, Congregational associations and newspapers were inviting disenfranchised New Schoolers to come back to the freedom of Congregationalism’s independency.

Chastened by the bitter divorce, New Schoolers did some serious soul-searching as they hung together,<sup>10</sup> claiming to be the true PCUSA.

## **Further North-South Division**

The Old School–New School split is a salutary example that “doctrine divides.” This was a necessary division that ultimately was healthy for both sides. While irreconcilable beliefs and practices were the wedge between the two schools, national sectionalism growing out of the 1830s would bring further ecclesiastical division by the time of the Civil War. Not one major American denomination was left united through that crisis.

The New School had a penchant for social activism. Its pronouncements against slavery and threats against churchmen holding slaves finally alienated twenty-one New School presbyteries in the decade before the War. These southern and border state churches became the United Synod of the Presbyterian Church and would later merge with the Old School Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States of America.

The latter body organized in the months following the beginning of the War. When the PCUSA had split in 1837, the Old School was about 55% of the original membership. In 1861 it lost about a third of its membership that was below the Mason-Dixon Line.<sup>11</sup> Included in that loss were some of the brightest theological and ecclesiastical stars in the history of American Presbyterianism.<sup>12</sup>

## **Reunion of the Two Schools**

The two schools in the South reunited in 1864. Over the objections of another prominent Old School leader, B. M. Palmer, Robert Dabney led the campaign to form a stronger Presbyterian church in the South.<sup>13</sup> New School pastors and churches were admitted into the PCCSA on the basis of subscription to the Westminster Standards.

After the War the Southern church updated its name to the Presbyterian Church U.S. Quite a few Presbyterian churches in the border states affiliated with the PCUS in reaction against ecclesiastical carpet-bagging from the North. Still on the rolls of the PCUSA, Southern churches were given a mandate by that body’s 1865 General Assembly to confess the sins of

slavery and secession. The deathblow was the assembly's designation of the South as a "mission field." Not surprisingly, a hallmark of Southern Presbyterianism became its insistence on the spiritual nature of the church.

In the North the Old School's major loss of the Southern churches had reduced this branch in size to that of the northern New School. That fact, combined with cooperative mission efforts between the two sides that were spawned by the exigencies of war or the opportunities of post-war reconstruction, got the two sides dialoguing. With a whole new generation of leaders on both sides since the rift of the 1830s, and in a new era that had been leveled by a devastating war, it was almost a foregone conclusion that the Old and New School of the North would test the waters for possible reunion.

Despite the precedent of an amicable reunion out of the Old Side-New Side controversy in the preceding century, respected voices urged caution about running back to the marriage altar. Charles Hodge knew the issues that had divided the PCUSA. The New School had examined and policed itself in the former areas of theological aberration. Hodge would not make accusations of heresy, but he cautioned that the New School's most telling weakness was its *tolerance* of beliefs and practice that were less than orthodox.<sup>14</sup>

A National Presbyterian Union Convention in 1867, promoted especially by laymen, found little resistance. This helped set the stage for a joint meeting of Old and New School assemblies in 1869. Commissioners of opposing camps met on opposite sides of the street in Pittsburgh and met in the middle of the road to shake hands. After a communion service and a vote to ask all the represented presbyteries to bless the reunion, the Old School moderator adjourned the joint meeting, pronouncing, "Whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder!" The united northern PCUSA met the next year in Albert Barnes' church in Philadelphia.

## Challenges from Unbelief and Optimism

The reunited Northern church had a broader base, but it still had in the Westminster Standards a precise expression of Christian doctrine and practice. As the church faced the temptations across the threshold of the modern era, this creed would serve as the touchstone to measure Christian orthodoxy. Churchmen with little respect for Westminster's timeless value would either ignore its truths or else try to change its substance. Despite the newly injected attitude of tolerance, the PCUSA of the late 1800s did respond to vigilant leaders who were "valiant for the truth."

There had been efforts at internal house-keeping in the ante-bellum years. Ecclesiastical trials had been initiated against notable pastors or teachers, the most-celebrated being Albert Barnes, who was finally acquitted of charges of Pelagianism by the General Assembly in 1836.

The theological aberrations in the first part of the century generally were rooted in overly optimistic views of human nature. In the late 1800s a new heresy arose. The attack was directly

against the Bible itself. Higher criticism had come of age, and now scholars were challenging the inerrancy of the Bible, as well as the very authority of the Bible as God's special revelation.

Convulsions from higher criticism entered the PCUSA, not surprisingly, from seminaries established before the War by the New School. Henry Preserved Smith and Arthur C. McGiffert of Lane Seminary in Cincinnati both changed their ecclesiastical affiliation to avoid separate indictments of heresy; they ultimately found refuge at Union Seminary in New York City. By that time, Union Seminary had declared itself independent of the mother denomination, ostensibly to free itself from denominational wranglings, but in reality to protect and hold its premier professor of Hebrew, Charles Augustus Briggs.

Hebrew students everywhere appreciate Briggs's contribution to the masterful revision of Gesenius's Hebrew lexicon (he is the final *B* in *BDB*). Bible-believing Presbyterians, however, view Briggs as the father of modern heresies, much like Marcion was to the early church, because he undercut the authority and reliability of the Bible as God's revelation to man. A harbinger of the modern era and a prophet of still distant post-modernism, Briggs claimed that besides Scripture, God also speaks through the church and through human reason.<sup>15</sup> He attacked Westminster's doctrines of the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible as obstacles that keep thinking men from coming to God. He called reverence for the Bible and its authority, "bibliolatry."

In the face of theological modernism the General Assembly in the early 1880s had issued a series of warnings, especially to seminary professors, to guard against any errors that questioned the divine origin and plenary inspiration of the Scriptures. Briggs, a self-styled church reformer, should not have been surprised when heresy charges were filed against him by his presbytery. The judicial process was protracted, but upon his conviction in 1893, Briggs became Episcopalian and Union Seminary became independent.

With regard to efforts to broaden the creed of the PCUSA, the liberalizing cause was not helped by the outspoken support of the likes of Professor Briggs. Many churchmen viewed the Westminster Confession as rigid theologically and socially arcane and out of touch with the modern age. Briggs expressed the sentiment of many: "These definitions [of Westminster] have ever been regarded as hard and offensive, and . . . they have kept multitudes from uniting with the Presbyterian Church."<sup>16</sup> Briggs called for a "new reformation" grounded in modern scientific methods that would lead the church beyond the scholasticism of 17<sup>th</sup> century England<sup>17</sup> and prepare the way for broader church alliances. While many Presbyterians of the age wanted to expand and qualify the doctrines of Westminster, Briggs wanted a brand new ecumenical creed. His colleague at Union Seminary, Philip Schaff, pronounced, "The old Calvinism is fast dying out. . . . We need a theology and confession that will prepare the way for the great work of the future—the reunion of Christendom in the creed of Christ."<sup>18</sup>

The campaign to revise the Westminster Standards got traction in 1889 when fifteen presbyteries overtured the General Assembly to review and revise the church's creed. At stake was a vision to reunite with other lost sheep of Presbyterianism, particularly the Cumberland Presbyterian Church.

The General Assembly proposed revisions to the Westminster Standards, and these were forwarded to the presbyteries for ratification at the same time that the celebrated revisionist, Charles Briggs, was on trial for heresy. The proposed revisions failed for lack of a super-majority among the presbyteries. Revision of the Confession would await a second attempt in the early 20th century.

## A Timeless Warning

The General Assembly met in Portland, Oregon, in 1892. Modern innovations in communication and travel enabled commissioners to make the trip to the West Coast, where a recent frontier civilization had blossomed into a modern city. The development of Portland and of the West seemed to hold promise for limitless progress.

Hope springs eternal, but there were cankers nibbling at the vitals of the mother church. Many leaders were justifiably concerned about their own theologians trying to redefine the Christian faith. Were she to maintain her historic Christian identity in an age flirting with theories of evolution and when society appeared to be progressing through human innovation, the PCUSA would have to make crystal clear her utter dependence upon the Bible with her intention to follow the faith solely laid out in the Scriptures. The Portland Assembly of 1892 rendered just such a determination in this profound statement, called the Portland Deliverance:

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 our 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.<sup>19</sup>

Thirty years later, when the cankers were turning into full-blown cancer, the thesis of this Deliverance became the argument of J. Gresham Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism*: rationalist liberals should be honest that they are not true Christians in the historic sense of having hope in the supernatural God who grants life and salvation through Christ alone. One would think that churchmen, of all people, should be honest. Those who reject the message of God's particular grace and his special revelation through the Bible should depart to found their own universalistic religion.

## Conclusion

Despite struggles, the PCUSA ended the 19<sup>th</sup> century better than it began the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Historic Presbyterianism prevailed because of the vigilance of a few and because of the

safeguard in the requirement of a super-majority to make constitutional changes. However, in the first decade of the new century the denomination actually did revise and enlarge the Westminster Standards. They did merge with a majority of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, traditionally Arminian in outlook. They did help launch and lead the socialist Federal Council of Christian Churches.<sup>20</sup>

Despite modern trends or advances in technology, the need of the human soul will always remain the same. The gospel message of salvation by grace alone is the sinner's only hope, and the God of the Bible is the only true God.

There are lessons from the Presbyterian Church of the 1800s. The first principle for Presbyterians who want to be biblical Christians is to work and fellowship only with Presbyterians who embrace the Westminster Standards and who will hold their church officers to their ordination vows.<sup>21</sup> That is the timeless message from history.

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<sup>1</sup> *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*.

<sup>2</sup> Church historians Mark Noll and Peter Wallace are cited by Sean Lucas, *On Being Presbyterian: Our Beliefs, Practices, and Stories* (2006), 193, 199.

<sup>3</sup> By 1900 the Methodist and Baptist churches together outnumbered Presbyterian churches by a proportion of 20 to 3.

<sup>4</sup> George Hays, *Presbyterians: A Popular Narrative of their Origin, Progress, Doctrines, and Achievements* (1892), 139.

<sup>5</sup> Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (2004), 420.

<sup>6</sup> Ps 51:5; Gen 6:5, 12; Rom 5:12, 15.

<sup>7</sup> Other anti-Reformed denominations were started by Presbyterians in this era: the Stonites (Christian Church) and the Campbellites (Disciples of Christ), eventually uniting in 1832.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in *The Presbyterian Enterprise* (1956), 164.

<sup>9</sup> Disenfranchised leaders gathered at a New School seminary in upstate New York to protest their orthodoxy in view of the sixteen charges leveled against them by the General Assembly. Less than a century later the modernist wing of the PCUSA gathered at the same seminary to decry the assembly's mandate of subscription to certain minimum requirements for ordination. This so-called Auburn Affirmation of 1924 branded the "five fundamentals" of the faith as "theories."

<sup>10</sup> Without a name change over 33 years and despite civil decisions against them, the four synods of the New School claimed to be the true PCUSA until the reunion.

<sup>11</sup> The departure of southern Old School members was sealed by the famous "Gardiner Spring Resolutions" passed by the assembly in May 1861, mandating that pastors and members swear allegiance to the federal government.

<sup>12</sup> Leading lights were Thornwell out of Columbia, SC; Dabney of Hampden-Sydney, VA; Palmer of New Orleans; and Girardeau of Charleston.

<sup>13</sup> Dabney taught at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia and had served as a chaplain under Stonewall Jackson.

<sup>14</sup> The New School's broad level of tolerance fit with its catholic self-identity. Cross-denominational efforts in evangelism and in fighting social ills are a modern manifestation of this blind tolerance, found mainly in New Evangelical churches. Old Schoolers would insist on militancy in promoting the truth of God's holiness and the purity of the church, lest blind cooperation with humanist-tainted methods sow the seeds of a church's own demise.

<sup>15</sup> C. A. Briggs, *The Authority of the Holy Scripture* (1891), 23.

<sup>16</sup> Briggs, *Whither: A Theological Question for the Time* (1889), 98.

<sup>17</sup> Briggs's indictment against the scholasticism of the Westminster Canons was also a slap against Princeton Seminary, which had preserved and promoted the Westminster Confession as the best expression of the Reformed faith.

<sup>18</sup> Cited in George Hutchinson, *History Behind the RPCES* (1974), 160.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Hutchinson, *History Behind the RPCES*, 164-165.

<sup>20</sup> William Roberts, the long-standing stated clerk of the PCUSA, helped guide the founding of the FCCC and was its first president in 1908. See “Roberts Rules of Order” in chapter 6 of Gary North’s *Crossed Fingers: How the Liberals Captured the Presbyterian Church* (1996), 349-350.

<sup>21</sup> At its 2006 General Assembly, the PCUSA determined that candidates for ordination could express scruples of reservation against a policy of celibacy for single pastors (whether homosexual or heterosexual). This decision, in effect, allows the individual candidate to overrule church policy.