

## Reformed Theology in America: The First 250 Years

Good evening! This evening we turn our attention to Reformed theology in America.

### 1. The History and Theology of Various Colonies

When we think of Protestantism and particularly Calvinism in the New World, our minds naturally turn to the English colonies. However, before we do so, we must not overlook an earlier effort by French colonists to establish a Reformed presence in North America.

The French Protestants were known as Huguenots. As you may know, they were repressed by the French government; one result of this persecution was a series of French religious wars, starting on March 1, 1562, with the massacre of Protestants at Vassy.

Just two weeks before that massacre, the Frenchman Jean Ribault set sail for the New World. He explored the St. Johns River in Florida, and encountered the Timucua Indians. Here's how he described them: "They be all naked and of goodly stature, mighty, faire and as well shapen . . . as any people in all the worlde, very gentill, curtious and of good nature. . . the men be of tawny color, hawke nosed and of a pleasant countenance. . . the women be well favored and modest."

Two years later, in 1564, Fort Caroline, named after King Charles IX, was founded on the St. Johns River, near present-day Jacksonville, Florida. However, this French effort was destined to be of short duration. In 1565, a Spanish force under Menendez captured both Fort Caroline and also an expeditionary force under Jean Ribault sent to attack St. Augustine. The French force was compelled to surrender after its ships were wrecked by a hurricane. In both instances, there was the natural expectation that the prisoners would be treated humanely. However, under orders from King Philip II, Menendez, with a few exceptions, executed all of the Frenchmen who would not renounce their Protestant faith. About 300 Huguenots were killed after having surrendered. A Spanish fort would later be founded fifteen miles south of St. Augustine, near where the second massacre occurred. It was named Fort Matanzas. In Spanish, "matanzas" means "slaughters."

It is certainly true that the slaughtering of these French soldiers was part of an international scramble for colonies in the New World, with all of the wealth and status and prestige and strategic advantages that presumably would follow. Nevertheless, the incidents in 1565 in Florida were not merely about a jockeying for position between rival European powers, nor merely the expression of the principle of *raison d'etat* ("reason of state", as enunciated by Cardinal Richelieu in the 1600s). There was very clearly a religious motivation to these massacres of French Protestants. What happened in North America was a continuation of the struggle between the true religion and the religion of Anti-Christ.

Later, there would be a significant French Reformed presence in North America, as these

Protestants would flee their native land after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, during the reign of Louis XIV, the “Sun-King”. Places such as Charleston, South Carolina, and New York, would be the beneficiaries of Huguenot immigrants, and their descendants would include Paul Revere, who galloped into history at midnight on April 19, 1775 to warn the Minutemen that the British were coming; John Jay, first Chief Justice of the United States; and John Lafayette Girardeau, noteworthy Southern Presbyterian theologian of the nineteenth century.

Meanwhile, the establishing of the Reformed faith in North America would have to wait about half a century after the ill-fated attempt in Florida. In 1607, the first permanent English colony in North America was founded at Jamestown, Virginia. Jamestown was very much Anglican in its religious orientation. While Anglicanism is often referred to as a *via media* between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, the Church of England’s Thirty-Nine Articles do bear the imprint of Reformed theology. Moreover, it has been argued that although Episcopacy was Jamestown’s “legal religion”,

nonconformists in England hushed their convictions in the hope that, in America, distance would protect them from . . . interference with their preferences. Both . . . the first pastor at Jamestown, and . . . his successor, were Cambridge graduates, and Puritanism was prevalent at that university. Dr. William Whitaker, professor of divinity at Cambridge, was a leading Puritan. His son, Rev. Alexander Whitaker, came to Jamestown, Va., with a company of Puritans under Sir Thomas Dale, in 1611. So zealous was Alexander Whitaker that he earned the title of the “self-denying Apostle of Virginia.”<sup>1</sup>

In any case, there is no question but that the Pilgrims who founded the colony at Plymouth in 1620 in what is now Massachusetts were committed to the Reformed faith. The Pilgrims were Separatists, believing that the Church of England was too corrupt for reforming, and that to participate in her was sinful. This was not a very popular position with King James I, who hounded them even after some of them had fled to the Netherlands. Nevertheless, the king became persuaded that these people, who were his subjects, could be put to good use by helping to colonize North America. Accordingly, a total of 102 would-be settlers set out on a dangerous journey across the Atlantic on board a ship that was only 100 feet in length—the *Mayflower*. After ten weeks at sea, they reached Cape Cod. This had not been their intended destination: they were considerably north of where they were supposed to land. They were, therefore, in an extra-legal situation. Given that fact, they, on November 11, 1620, entered into the “Mayflower Compact”, which has been hailed as the first instance of self-government in the New World. Here is a modern version of it:

*In the name of God, Amen. We, whose names are underwritten, the loyal subjects of our dread Sovereign Lord King James, by the Grace of God, of Great Britain, France, and Ireland, King, defender of the Faith, etc.*

---

1

George P. Hays, *Presbyterians: A Popular Narrative of Their Origin, Progress, Doctrines, and Achievements* (New York: J. A. Hill & Co., 1892), p. 60.

*Having undertaken, for the Glory of God, and advancements of the Christian faith and honor of our King and Country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the Northern parts of Virginia, do by these presents, solemnly and mutually, in the presence of God, and one another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil body politic; for our better ordering, and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by virtue hereof to enact, constitute, and frame, such just and equal laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions, and offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the colony; unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.*

In addition to this foundational document of the later American experiment in self-government and majoritarian rule, the colony around Plymouth Rock is noteworthy in other ways. One of them is the fact that only about half of the 102 Pilgrims survived that first winter. Their courage and perseverance inspired many over the past four centuries; more than that, the Pilgrims' pioneering spirit informed the American "can-do" attitude.

Another significant fact relates to their worship practices. They journeyed across the ocean for the sake of religious freedom—that is, to be able to worship God according to conscience. Their worship services were characterized by simplicity and were saturated with Scripture. Their worship music consisted of singing the Biblical Psalms and doing so *a capella* (i.e., without musical instrumentation). They generally observed only the Sabbath as a religious holy day. The one exception would be days of fasting or thanksgiving. Of course, we're all familiar with what has been called the first thanksgiving feast in America, in 1621. By the way, wild turkey probably was on the menu, but it is likely that other wildfowl, such as duck and goose, would be more prominent. Other foods at that feast could have been carrier pigeon, corn, and seafood, including eel, lobster, clams, and mussels. However, there was no cranberry sauce.

And another interesting aspect of their colony was an essay entitled, "Reasons and Considerations Touching the Lawfulness of Removing Out of England Into the Parts of America." This treatise set forth an apologetic for the lawful nature of colonization. Robert Cushman argued that Christians could rightfully live in "the heathens' country" on several bases. First, because "we daily pray for the conversion of the heathens", it is reasonable to believe that those prayers will be answered through ordinary means rather than "only referred to God's extraordinary work from heaven". Also, the land in the colony was common land and largely empty and unused. Secondly, the "emperor" (i.e., that Indian chief) allowed them to live in his land, not only because they are the servants of King James "whose the land (as he confesseth) is", but also because the chief had found them "just, honest, kind and peaceable, and so loves our company." Cushman wrote that "as the enterprise is weighty and difficult, so the honor is more worthy, to plant a rude wilderness, to enlarge the honor and fame of our dread sovereign, but chiefly to display the efficacy and power of the Gospel, both in jealous preaching, professing, and wise walking under it, before the faces of these blind infidels."<sup>2</sup>

The commitment to purity of worship and to missionary enterprise at Plymouth, is seen also in the neighboring colony of Massachusetts Bay, founded by Puritans. Unlike the Pilgrims, the Puritans remained in the Church of England, seeking its reformation. However, in the England under the Stuart kings, that reform seemed a long way off. In 1630, ten years after the sailing of the *Mayflower* to the New World, a group of Puritans set sail for Massachusetts. The flagship of the eleven ship convoy was the *Arbella*. The leader of these 700 immigrants was John Winthrop. This was not the first group of Puritans to settle in New England. However, it became perhaps the most famous, because of Winthrop's sermon on board ship, "A Model of Christian Charity." Winthrop's noteworthy phrase in that message was "City on a Hill"—that is, the idea that the New England enterprise was to be an example to Old England.

Incidentally, this notion of America being a "City on a Hill" has been utilized by numerous politicians of various persuasions. Like many things that were found in Puritan New England, such as a commitment to education (as seen by the establishment of Harvard College in 1636), this motto has been secularized and changed into something very different from what was originally intended. And that observation leads us to consider some of the challenges to Puritanism, which eventually led to its downfall in New England.

## 2. The Challenges to Puritanism

There are no perfect societies or organizations in this world. Sin affects all that men and women touch. Even in a "city on a hill", there will be imperfections which can, if not addressed, lead to the destruction of that enterprise.

One of the challenges came from dissenters. Roger Williams, who in 1636 founded a settlement he called Providence in what is today the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, challenged Puritan orthodoxy on matters such as church-state relations and the baptism of children. Anne Hutchinson was a very intelligent and influential woman, who was a heretic. Among her unorthodox ideas were antinomianism (being against the law of God) and a belief in inner light, as well as a rejection of predestination. After a trial, Mrs. Hutchinson was banished from the colony. She and her family traveled to New Netherland (today New York), where they were murdered by Indians in 1643.

One of the difficulties has to do with the children of Puritans. Those who made the arduous trans-Atlantic journey were most likely converted. However, after a generation or two, what about the offspring who do not show signs of true faith? And what about the grandchildren—that is, the children of those who are unregenerated? Should the children of those who had not professed faith be baptized? The solution to that dilemma was the Half-Way Covenant, put forth by Rev. Solomon Stoddard and adopted in 1662. This allowed for those who did not live scandalous lives to have their children baptized and to participate in the Lord's Supper. The sacrament of communion was therefore

regarded as a converting ordinance.

The ideas inherent in the Half-Way Covenant went against the grain of Puritanism. Indeed, it is arguable that the First Great Awakening was not only a reaction against the Half-Way Covenant, but also a rediscovery of the Puritan way.

And yet another challenge to Puritanism was a series of witchcraft trials, particularly in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692. Because of this series of events, the Puritans have been mercilessly criticized in academia and in popular culture, such as by Arthur Miller's 1953 play *The Crucible*. However, it is only fair to point out that there were occult activities in and around Salem; and, although the prosecution of the cases got out of hand (particularly with the use of spectral evidence), the devil really was active in his efforts to destroy the Puritan colony. However, it would take more than a century until Satan accomplished his goal—by the early part of the nineteenth century the heirs of the Puritans by and large would apostatize and become Unitarians.

### 3. The Beginnings of American Presbyterianism

We now turn our attention away from New England to the Middle Colonies. Before the arrival of Presbyterians in the New World, another brand of Calvinism, that of the Dutch variety, took up residence in a colony known as New Netherland, the claims of which stretched from the Delmarva Peninsula to Capt Cod. The capital, founded in 1624, was called New Amsterdam. Of course, today we know this city as New York, the change in name occurring after the British captured the Dutch colony. However, although Anglicanism was established in New York, the Dutch Reformed Church was granted toleration—this was one of the provisions of the 1664 surrender agreement. The Dutch presence in the New World occurred about the same time as the meeting of the Synod of Dordt in the Netherlands in 1618-1619. At Dordt, this international church council decisively set forth the Five Points of Calvinism, which form the acrostic TULIP (which, appropriately enough, is a well-known Dutch flower). Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints—these five doctrines encapsulated the essence of Calvinism with respect to salvation. In addition to these doctrines of grace, the Dutch Reformed Church strongly maintained a traditional Reformed church order, including rule by elders.

The beginnings of American Presbyterianism can be traced to Francis Makemie, an Irish Presbyterian minister, who is credited with founding the first Presbyterian congregation on these shores, at Snow Hill, Maryland in 1683. He also founded congregations in other places in Maryland. In 1706, there was a sufficient number of ministers to form the first presbytery in America; and in 1717, the first synod was formed, comprised of four presbyteries, with churches from New York to Maryland.

One of the severest challenges which Presbyterian ministers might face in those early days was that of preaching without a license. Episcopalianism became established in New York in 1693, and Governor Cornbury was determined to make a point by having Makemie arrested. Makemie was tried and acquitted, and his acquittal is regarded as a

landmark religious liberty case. However, it would appear that that ordeal took its toll on him, and he died in 1708 at the age of fifty.

Meanwhile, Presbyterianism continued to grow, largely through the immigration of Scots and Scots-Irish. But there were problems, precisely because of the fact that it was comprised of so many immigrants. A nineteenth century historian, Robert Ellis Thompson, put it this way:

As the church of the new immigration it had great difficulties to encounter. The people were extremely poor, and sparsely settled; and in their disheartening battle for the conquest of nature, they tended to sink into mere animalism through the neglect of spiritual interests. The supply of ministers was far below the need, and there was a temptation to accept as such men poorly fitted in point of learning or of character. But the Presbytery exacted adequate credentials and assurance of orthodoxy and good character from all applicants. When a young Welshman in 1710 undertook to preach to the people of the Welsh Tract without a license, he was rebuked, and required to place himself under competent direction that he might be educated for the sacred office; and it was not until 1715 that he was ordained. The number of cases of discipline for moral offenses was excessive among both ministers and people; and to these were added disputes and uncertainties as to the degrees within which marriage was forbidden, as might be expected in small and isolated settlements, where the range of choice was very limited.<sup>3</sup>

Yes, American Presbyterianism was growing. But it was experiencing what we might call growing pains. Indeed, it would suffer a split that came about because of the First Great Awakening. And so we now turn our attention to the first two Great Awakenings in American history.

#### 4. The Two Great Awakenings

As we have already noted, New England Puritanism, several generations after its founding, was beginning to show signs of decay. This fits a pattern which has often been seen in church history, viz., that of a movement or organization or branch of the church sliding into lethargy and heresy after a couple of generations. This is the nature of human endeavors, for we are all tainted by sin.

Often, God raises up someone or various individuals in order to call people to repentance, and back to the “old paths”, as the prophet Jeremiah wrote. Such was the case in the early eighteenth century.

The Great Awakening, which would have such an effect in New England, actually began in the Middle Colonies. A man who had been ordained as a German Reformed minister,

---

3

Robert Ellis Thompson, *A History of the Presbyterian Churches in the United States* (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1895), pp. 19-20.

Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen, was later re-ordained by the Classis of Amsterdam, and came to New Jersey as pastor of four Dutch Reformed congregations in the Raritan Valley. In his preaching, he, in a rough manner that matched what was then a frontier area of New Jersey, challenged the complacency of his hearers who might be smugly depending on their profession of orthodoxy rather than having a genuine faith in Christ. The *Encyclopedia of New Jersey* evaluates him this way:

Loyal to the Heidelberg Catechism, he emphasized pietism, conversion, repentance, strict moral standards, private devotions, excommunication, and church discipline. He was an eloquent preacher who published numerous sermons, but struggled against indifferentism and empty formalism. His theories conflicted with the orthodox views of [various churchmen], who challenged Frelinghuysen's religious emotionalism and unauthorized practices. As one of the fearless missionaries of the First Great Awakening in America, Frelinghuysen stressed tangible religious experiences. He trained young men for the clergy, often ordaining them without permission. His evangelical fervor and autonomous actions helped to instill an element of local independence for Dutch churches in North America's middle colonies.

Others who were key figures in this Awakening were the Presbyterian Gilbert Tennent, the Anglican George Whitefield, and the Congregationalist Jonathan Edwards. Tennent was friends with Frelinghuysen and ministered in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. His most famous sermon was "On the Danger of an Unconverted Ministry", preached in 1739, in which he compared those ministers who opposed the Great Awakening to hypocritical Pharisees. Whitefield was already known for his ministry in England, particularly his open-air preaching; he made several trips to America, and helped give the colonies a sense of unity—a sense of being Americans. Edwards' most famous sermon was "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," preached on July 8, 1741, at Enfield, Massachusetts, as well as at his congregation in Northampton, Massachusetts. Who can forget Edwards' vivid imagery?

The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood. Thus all you that never passed under a great change of heart, by the mighty power of the Spirit of God upon your souls; all you that were never born again, and made new creatures, and raised from being dead in sin, to a state of new, and before altogether unexperienced light and life, are in the hands of an angry God. However you may have reformed your life in many things, and may have had religious affections, and may keep up a form of religion in your families and closets, and in the house of God, it is nothing but his mere pleasure that keeps you from being this moment swallowed up in everlasting destruction. However unconvinced you may now be of the truth of what you hear, by and by you will be fully convinced of it. Those that are gone from being in the like circumstances with you, see that it was so with them; for destruction came

suddenly upon most of them; when they expected nothing of it, and while they were saying, Peace and safety: now they see, that those things on which they depended for peace and safety, were nothing but thin air and empty shadows.

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince; and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment. It is to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go to hell the last night; that you was suffered to awake again in this world, after you closed your eyes to sleep. And there is no other reason to be given, why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up. There is no other reason to be given why you have not gone to hell, since you have sat here in the house of God, provoking his pure eyes by your sinful wicked manner of attending his solemn worship. Yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you do not this very moment drop down into hell.

Undoubtedly, there were hypocrites among church members in Reformed churches, and without question the Great Awakening was a heaven-sent revival. However, there were also emotional excesses and other irregularities, including with respect to worship and polity (church government), associated with this movement. Understandably, therefore, churchmen and lay people were split on the matter. At the meeting of the Synod of Philadelphia in 1741, matters came to a head, when a majority denied seats to members of the Presbytery of New Brunswick because of the following offenses: “for overthrowing the authority of Synod by confining its powers to advice; for disorderly interruptions into other men’s congregations; for censorious judgments of those who did not walk with them, resulting in the disturbance and division of congregations; for making the call to the minister a matter merely of personal feeling; for preaching the terrors of the law ‘in such a manner and dialect as has no precedent in the Word of God’; and for asserting that truly gracious persons are able to judge with certainty both of their own state and that of others.” This led to a formal schism of the Presbyterian Church into Old Side and New Side in 1741, as the representatives of the Presbytery of New Brunswick withdrew. After seventeen years of separation, the two sides reunited. In matters of polity and governance, such as the authority of Synods and the inappropriateness of intruding onto another man’s ministry, the Old Side carried the day. On the other hand, in accord with the New Side, ministerial candidates were to be examined regarding their “experimental acquaintance with religion” and not just their academic credentials and orthodoxy.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, even during the time of division between Old Side and New Side, the

Presbyterian Church was growing. This was particularly true of the New Side. For example, in 1755, the (New Side) Synod of New York established the Presbytery of Hanover to serve new congregations in Virginia.

In addition to growth in membership and ministers and churches, Presbyterianism was exercising influence in education. At Neshaminy, Pennsylvania, William Tennent in 1726 had founded an academy, derisively referred to by his opponents as “the Log College.” From those inauspicious beginnings came other efforts, which eventually resulted in the founding of a school called the College of New Jersey, later named Princeton College, which today is Princeton University.

We alluded a moment ago to the role played by the Great Awakening in helping the colonists, through the shared experience of this revival, to realize that they were Americans. This was a key factor in the events of the 1770s, when America declared its independence. Besides helping to create a sense of a new nation or new people, the ministers also were at the forefront of the freedom movement. This advocacy of revolution was in accord with Calvinistic doctrine, which rejected the notion of rebellion against constituted authority, but also allowed for the overthrow of tyranny if led by lower magistrates. It is because of this, as well as the efforts of John Witherspoon, that King George III is said to have remarked that America has run off with a Presbyterian parson. Witherspoon was a Scot who had immigrated to America to become President of the College of New Jersey (which today is Princeton University). From that influential position, he trained numerous students who would take up the patriot cause. Witherspoon is also noteworthy as being the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence. It has been suggested that up to nine-tenths of the officers in George Washington’s army were Presbyterians.

It is unquestionably true that Protestant ministers, especially those who were Reformed and particularly the Presbyterians, had a prominent position in fostering American independence. Their societal clout was enormous, and it is one of the high water marks in the history of the Reformed faith in America.

In the Early National Period, the new nation was intent on expanding into the frontier—at that time, places like Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Presbyterianism often sprouted up wherever the Scots-Irish took root. However, one of the problems faced by the Presbyterian church was a lack of trained ministers, along with an inflexibility in terms of how to fill the pulpits in backwoods areas. The Baptists and the Methodists did not face similar restraints, and their churches were often supplied by preachers with minimal training, at best. But because these other denominations were able to provide preachers, they were able to grow at an exponential rate, leaving the Presbyterians behind in terms of membership figures. People in the wilderness preferred an untrained minister to none at all.

Besides this issue of the availability of ministers, the Early National Period saw a shift away from Calvinistic theology to Arminianism. Or, more broadly, we could say that the democratic impulse of the new nation helped to produce a pragmatic and man-

centered approach, in contrast to the historic approach, viz., that of a principled and God-centered perspective.

This movement away from a sound approach could be seen even in the First Great Awakening. Robert Ellis Thompson found it telling that the Awakening movement had been called by the name “Methodism”:

It set out with the assumption that there is one method of grace, by which all God’s true people are made alive unto him through his Son; and it exacted of all much the same evidences of this uniform Christian experience. Instantaneous, conscious conversion, preceded by an overwhelming sense of personal guilt, and followed by a joyful assurance of acceptance with God, was the only *ordo salutis* [order of salvation] it recognized. Religion must thus come into the man like “a bolt from the blue,” and with no conceivable relation to the past providences of his life, the human relationships in which he had been placed by God, and the Christian nurture in divine things he had received from his childhood. . . . The “judgment of charity” of the Reformed churches was displaced by the Anabaptist demand for a church-membership giving “credible evidence” of regeneration; and the Christian nurture of the family, along with the catechetical instruction of the young by their pastors, came to be regarded as relatively unimportant.

The resultant type of Christian experience was one isolated from the relationships and relative duties of life in a very un-Protestant fashion; and the energy of attention was concentrated upon the succession of inward emotions and feelings. An age of introspection and consequently of spiritual gloom was one result, while the direct application of Christian principle to the whole life of Christian society, and the realization of God’s kingdom in this present world, were hardly contemplated as Christian duties. The theocratic element in the life of the Reformed Church . . . gave way before an introspective pietism, which had much in common with the monasticism of the Church of Rome.<sup>5</sup>

What Thompson perceived about the First Great Awakening would be magnified and intensified in the Second Great Awakening, which occurred in the early nineteenth century. One of the more notable events was a camp meeting in 1801 in Cane Ridge, Kentucky, at a Presbyterian church, pastored by a young minister, Barton Stone. Thousands came. Preaching went around the clock. However, the worship services, though perhaps having their roots in Scottish communion seasons, were anything but Presbyterian. Among the emotional and other excesses were manifestations of loud laughing, dog-like barking, and bodily jerking (“the jerks”).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the revival played into the hands of the less-theologically oriented branches of the church, such as

---

5

*Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

6

Mark A. Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World: The History of North American Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 62-63.

the Methodists and Baptists.

Eventually, over the course of several decades, the Second Great Awakening would affect Reformed churches even with respect to the theology of redemption. Numerous ministers who held Presbyterian credentials, such as Charles Grandison Finney, rejected Calvinism and embraced Arminianism—i.e., the heresy that salvation depended on man's will rather than God's grace. That story took place largely in the 1820s and 1830s—and therefore the telling of it will have to await another day.

## 5. Learning from History

As we attempt to learn from this historical record, at least three themes are apparent: martyrdom and persecution; mysteries of providence; and missionary proclamation.

First, with regard to martyrdom and persecution, we began with the account of the earliest Calvinistic witness in North America, which resulted in the sacrifice of those Huguenots not only because of international political expediency, but also because of the hatred of the Reformed faith. This theme is one which has most often been played out in other locations around the globe—not often, in the general scheme of things, on the North American continent. It is not that there have not been martyrs here, especially among those who carried the gospel to the Native Americans. However, throughout much of the history of the Reformed faith in North America, there has not been much bloodshed. In that, we have been quite blessed. But, as we look around us at the increasing hatred of a hostile world, we must wonder how much longer we will enjoy peace and tranquility. Already, so-called “toleration” is becoming intolerant of traditional morality, and Christians are being fined for their beliefs and practices. Imprisonment and even executions may not be far behind. Indeed, it is arguable that suffering is the usual lot of the church in this world. Whatever may happen on this continent in the decades and centuries ahead, we certainly join in spirit with the martyrs who cry from the altar, “How long, O Lord?”

That leads us, secondly, to think of the mysteries of providence. Why, indeed, do things always seem to go downhill? Why were those French Protestants slaughtered? Why did the Puritan “city on the hill” have its light extinguished? Why is that the bulk of purported Presbyterians today do not have a credible profession of faith? Why is that such things could happen?

Well, of course, in the final analysis, we don't know. These are among God's mysterious ways by which the reprobate fill up divine wrath. They are also ways of not only calling a people but also purifying them and making them long for and fit for heaven.

D.G. Hart and John R. Muether, in their survey of American Presbyterianism, entitled *Seeking a Better Country*, observe: “What appears to be defeat in the history of redemption turns out ultimately to be victory”; further, the martyrs mentioned in Hebrews 11 “were as ‘successful’ as the victors in [Moses'] contest with Pharaoh because none had received what God ultimately promised, namely, ‘a better country,’ ‘a heavenly one.’”

Applying that lesson to American Presbyterianism, they argue: “The apparent lack of success that Presbyterians have experienced . . . should not necessarily be any more disheartening compared with those times when Presbyterianism in the United States flourished, since adversity is what the church should expect. Christ and the apostles regularly warned New Testament believers that the church’s pilgrimage to glory would be rocky, that opposition would be constant, that faithlessness would be an ongoing dilemma for officers and members.” They conclude: “And so, like Paul and the early church, American Presbyterians should ‘not lose heart.’ We may be ‘afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed’ . . . . Ultimately, the hope for American Presbyterians rests not in their own accomplishments but in the God whose glory, as the Shorter Catechism has it, is their ‘chief end’ and source of eternal joy.”<sup>7</sup>

And thirdly, we would note the theme of missionary proclamation. We began with the tragedy in Florida in 1565—interestingly, the very year after Calvin died. At least two points can be made in conjunction with this theme. One is that it is often the case that liberalism comes in through those who are dedicated to spreading the gospel, particularly on the mission field. This is, in one sense, understandable. People who genuinely have a heart for others can, in their zeal and soft-heartedness, sometimes forget the need to maintain orthodoxy. We have already witnessed this phenomenon in our consideration of the New Side/Old Side split, and it is evident in the Old School/New School schism in the 1830s. We will in the future, Lord willing, look at the Old School/New School division, as well contemplate how this phenomenon played out in the twentieth century, as liberalism infected mainline Presbyterianism, both North and South. A second point is that the Reformed faith, properly understood, has always had an evangelistic thrust. Despite caricatures to the contrary, those who are Calvinistic have been at the forefront of taking the good news to those who are lost.

## 6. Final Thoughts

As we look at the Reformed faith in America, one thing stands out, and that is not only its ethnic diversity, but also its essential unity.

In the twenty-first century, cultural historians often write of the significance of various ethnicities. Further, there are historians who would contend that geography and climate are history’s determining factors. Certainly, ethnicity and geography are important, and they help to give texture to the historiographical enterprise. However, we would contend that intellectual- religious factors are the key to history: what a person thinks and what he believes will determine how he will act.

The history of the Reformed faith in North America encompasses French Protestant soldiers setting up a fort on a Florida beach, nonconformists seeking to make Jamestown profitable, separatists (Pilgrims) enduring harsh winters on Cape Cod, Dutchmen setting

up large plantations in the Hudson Valley and in a port called New Amsterdam, Scotsmen and Scots-Irish hacking out an existence in the wilderness. During the flood of immigration in the nineteenth century, Presbyterians evangelized Italians and Jews. Today, the Reformed faith in North America includes Hispanics, Filipinos, Sudanese, Vietnamese, Chinese, Koreans, and, yes, Japanese. These newer immigrants usually gravitate to the cities, which are much different from the frontier of three and four centuries ago. Yet there is a fraternal bond among the mosaic of multitudes, reflective of the throng around the throne, praising the Lamb who was slain for redeeming grace. That is the story of the Reformed faith in North America.

### Reformed Theology in America: The Last 200 Years

We have mentioned the American Revolution as being a high-water mark for the Reformed faith in America. But at the same time, there was a development of unbelief and irreligion. Although there was a Christian component to the American Revolution, it is also the case that Enlightenment principles were at work, which can be seen, for instance, by the writings of Thomas Jefferson, the chief author of the Declaration of Independence. As the country came out of the Revolutionary period into the Early National period, heterodoxy was on the march.

Undoubtedly, the “natural evil result of a condition of war” was a major reason for the weakness of the church. Simultaneously, deism—that is, the idea that so emphasizes the transcendence of God that His sovereign intervention in the affairs of men is rejected—found widespread expression, particularly in the institutions of higher learning. “A contemporary calls the college of William and Mary ‘a hot-bed of French politics and religion.’ Yale College was, at the time when Timothy Dwight, the elder, assumed the presidency of it, full of societies and clubs of atheists. The students fell into the habit of taking on themselves the names of French infidels whom they specially admired.” Politics, too, felt the infusion of deistic ideas, with many prominent statesmen embracing this faith. Indeed, in Kentucky, the legislature “dismissed its chaplain, and many of the towns . . . went to the extent of changing their names for those of French unbelievers. The Church was numerically reduced and appeared to be on the verge of a collapse.”<sup>8</sup>

#### 1. Religion on the Frontier

Partially in reaction to the rise of infidelity, and partially as a manifestation of religion on the frontier, the Second Great Awakening began in 1801. Unlike the First Awakening, which was led by Calvinists, the Second Awakening was largely Arminian in its orientation. Instead of being God-centered, the revival was man-centered. This fact is seen particularly with respect to the type of worship that was offered. Rather than a reverent service, many of these revival services featured all kinds of emotional excesses.

This excessiveness was why many Presbyterian leaders counseled their people not to get carried away. Though the presbyters greatly desired revival, they also were cautious.

Another factor on the frontier was the lack of ministers. We mentioned in our previous lecture that the Baptists and Methodists, who were much more flexible with regard to the ordination of preachers, had increased exponentially, leaving the Presbyterians far behind—a phenomenon which is still reflected in the relative size of the denominations. However, one branch of Presbyterianism was founded two centuries ago precisely because of the issue of ministerial educational requirements. In 1806, the Synod of Kentucky dissolved the Presbytery of Cumberland for its ordaining men who did not have the requisite education. Eventually, a new denomination known as the Cumberland Presbyterian Church was formed.

This new branch of the Church not only allowed flexibility with regard to ministerial credentials, but, it also modified the Westminster Standards in such a way as to contradict historic Reformed theology. As the Cumberland Church noted in the Preface to its 1883 Confession of Faith, “In compiling the *Confession of Faith*, the fathers of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church had one leading thought before them, and that was to so modify the *Westminster Confession* as to eliminate therefrom the doctrine of universal fore-ordination and its legitimate sequences, unconditional election and reprobation, limited atonement, and divine influence correspondingly circumscribed.”

Obviously, it is impossible to deny these doctrines and still be considered Reformed or legitimately Presbyterian. Denying these teachings is a denial of Calvinism. It is not an exaggeration to say that the Cumberland Presbyterian Church represents an early form of theological liberalism. This includes, of course, the phenomenon of using historic terms, such as “Presbyterian”, but imparting to them totally different meaning.

## 2. The New New England Theology

Meanwhile, back in New England, a new theology was beginning to take hold. Many of the Congregationalists there had long ago abandoned their Puritan roots and adopted, among other heresies, Unitarianism—i.e., a rejection of belief in the Triune God.

However, even among those who still held to Trinitarianism, there was a slipping away from the old paths. Championed by men like Joseph Bellamy (1719-1790) and Samuel Hopkins (1721-1803), the New Divinity represented a modified Calvinism. One of the major heretical doctrines had to do with the nature of sin. Bellamy, Hopkins, and others essentially denied the reality of original sin, asserting rather that man was sinful not because of an inherited depravity but because of his sinful acts. Another problematic approach was an emphasis on the atonement with respect to God as moral governor of the universe, to the exclusion of the idea of Christ’s paying a satisfaction of divine justice on the cross.<sup>9</sup>

Although the New Divinity traces its roots to America's premier theologian, Jonathan Edwards, his successors certainly took Edwards' thought in a significantly different direction. As one critic has put it, Edwards' "would-be disciples . . . used his language and ignored his piety. Calvinism . . . degenerated into a scheme of theology plus an independent set of 'duties.' Its holy fire was quenched, and its theological ashes lay exposed to the four winds." He added: "The logic of Calvinistic piety was being transformed into a vast, complicated, and colorless theological structure, bewildering to its friends and ridiculous to its enemies. It was like a proud and beggared king, hiding his shame with scarlet rags and yellow trinkets."<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, history demonstrates that any resemblance of orthodoxy could not be maintained by this New Divinity for very long. By the end of the nineteenth century, it was overwhelmed by Unitarianism and ultimately by a secular humanism. In the twentieth century and now in the twenty-first century, New England's religious landscape has not significantly changed in these respects.

### 3. Presbyterian Seminaries

Interestingly, just about the time as this controversy erupted, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America established Princeton Theological Seminary. This 1812 event was one of the most significant in early nineteenth century American Presbyterianism. This institution, located near the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University), ultimately became the premier seminary among Presbyterians, and among the most prestigious in the world.

Princeton's professors, in addition to the scholarship, were known for their deep piety. To take one example, the first professor at Princeton, Archibald Alexander, wrote *Thoughts on Religious Experience*. Listen to his counsel:

All those acts of faith which bring the extent and spirituality of the law of God fully into view must be accompanied with painful emotions, on account of the deep conviction of lack of conformity to that perfect rule, which cannot but be experienced when that object is before the mind. But all those invitations, promises, and declarations which exhibit a Saviour and the method of recovery, when truly believed under a just apprehension of their nature, must be accompanied, not only with love, but joy and hope, and a free consent to be saved in God's appointed way; and when the previous distress and discouragement have been great, and the views of Gospel truth clear, the joy is overflowing, and as long as these views are unclouded, peace flows like a river.<sup>11</sup>

---

University Press, 1972), pp. 406ff.

10

Joseph Haroutunian, *Piety versus Moralism: The Passing of the New England Theology*, quoted in Ahlstrom, *op. cit.*, p. 413.

11

Princeton Seminary would become known as Old Princeton, due to its deliberate adherence, over the course of more than a century, to its original Calvinistic theology, despite the new winds which were blowing. But what we must never forget is that its theological commitment was not simply academic, but was accompanied by a heart-felt piety.

In mentioning the founding of Princeton Seminary, we would be remiss if we did not take note of an even older Presbyterian seminary, viz., Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Founded in 1810, this school, presently located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is the fifth oldest seminary in America, and the oldest one that still adheres to the Bible as the Word of God. It is the official seminary of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA), a branch of the church sometimes referred to as the “Covenanters”.

Prior to seminaries, ministerial training was usually done by means of apprenticeship: ministerial students would learn under seasoned pastors. The seminary model marked a definite trend toward more specialized training. It is interesting to note that Princeton Seminary began just about the same time as the controversy over ministerial educational credentials, which resulted in the new Cumberland Presbyterian Church. The establishing of Princeton Seminary not only represents a concern over the growing secularization of the adjacent college, but, it also reflects a growing east-west divide within the Presbyterian Church—a difference in doctrine and approach between the more urbane eastern and the frontier western.

#### 4. Old School vs. New School

And that leads us to consider a major division within American Presbyterianism, that between the Old School and the New School in the 1830s.

The seeds for this schism were planted as far back as 1801, when a Plan of Union was effected between the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists. In that first year of the nineteenth century, in the early days of the Republic, this type of cooperation seemed to make good sense. Presbyterianism and Congregationalism shared much in common, with the major difference, historically, being the matter of church government or polity. Congregationalists asserted that each congregation was its own autonomous entity, which could, nonetheless, voluntarily associate with other congregations in societies for fellowship and mission. Presbyterians believed that the church is an organic whole, and that the term “church” could properly refer not only to the church as a whole (the church universal) and particular congregations, but to other manifestations of the church, such as presbyteries and General Assemblies. In an era of cooperation when polity distinctions were not drawn as sharply as they would be later, and in an atmosphere of wanting to parallel the development of the nation on the frontier with the spread of the church, entering into an agreement such as the Plan of Union made sense.

---

Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience* (1844; rpt. London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), p. 73.

However, within a generation, problems arose. The most immediately apparent was the fact that the Plan of Union essentially provided for hybrid congregations—partially Congregationalist and partially Presbyterian, with the result that there were men taking seats in presbyteries and other courts of the Presbyterian Church who had not had Presbyterian ordination and who were not held to the standards of Presbyterian ordination. That irregularity would have been bad enough. However, the more serious issue was that many from a Congregationalist background had been influenced by the New Divinity—the Hopkinsianism of New England—which doctrines undermine Reformed theology.

The differing perspectives and theologies led to the development of two parties in the Presbyterian Church. At the 1837 General Assembly, those who favored the Old School—that is, the original doctrine of the Westminster Standards, including with regard to the substitutionary atonement of Christ—were in the majority. They took full advantage of the situation by passing motions that excised four of the nine synods of the denomination, because of their having been formed as a result of the Plan of Union. The next year, 1838, the New School men were not recognized by the Moderator of the General Assembly. They subsequently withdrew from the church building where the General Assembly had gathered, and formed their own General Assembly a few blocks away. The Presbyterian Church had split in half, with both parts claiming to be the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

Just a few years prior to the Old School/New School division in the main Presbyterian body, the Reformed Presbyterian Church went through its own division. Reformed Presbyterians historically had refused to allow its members to vote or participate in the political process, because of the failure of the U.S. Constitution officially to acknowledge the kingship of Jesus Christ and His rule over the nation. However, this counter-cultural position put the Reformed Presbyterian Church in a difficult position. By the 1830s, many within the small denomination desired a relaxation of this rule, especially with respect to service on juries. In 1833, this branch of the church split, almost exactly into equal halves. The New Light group, known as the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America, General Synod, allowed political participation, while the Old Lights, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, continued the historic practice of the Covenanters.

This twin set of divisions in the 1830s underscores not only theological diversity, but also the interplay between theology and the relationship between church and society. The Reformed Presbyterian controversy, with regard to the participation or non-participation in civil government, obviously has societal implications. But some of the impetus for the New School approach among mainline American Presbyterians had to do with the desire for cultural impact by Christians, across denominational lines. The Early National period, which led to the Jacksonian era, featured an emphasis on freedom and a rise in democratic principles. These political realities were viewed as a harbinger of a golden period which would not only be of benefit to America, but also the world as a whole. At the same time, all kinds of benevolent societies took their place on the

American scene. There were associations advocating abolitionism, touting temperance, promoting Sunday Schools, publishing tracts and other literature, and sending out missionaries. To use the title of Alice Felt Tyler's classic book, it was a time of *Freedom's Ferment*. But the fundamental problem was that the focus on societal reform often overwhelmed a commitment to doctrinal fidelity, leading to theological weakness and error.

## 5. War for Southern Independence

The Old School/New School division in the 1830s, it can be argued, presaged the sectional conflict in the nation in the 1860s. Certainly this was the position taken by C.C. Goen in his book, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation*. Professor Goen's point was that slavery was the issue that broke apart the major Protestant churches and thus snapped the ties that bound people North and South.

However, the Old School/New School schism was not a sectional divide per se, in that there could be found supporters of each position (that is, Old School and New School) in both North and South. More than that, we would suggest that though the controversy over slavery was definitely the occasion for sectional division, there were deeper ideological fissures that caused division, both politically and ecclesiastically.

It is not correct to subordinate the theological causes of the Old School/New School split to social and political matters, such as the issue of slavery. The foundational cause is the method by which to interpret Scripture. In other words, the hermeneutical issue is the key to understanding the reason why churchmen went their separate ways—a hermeneutical issue that manifested itself in several different ways, both at the time and in subsequent generations.

The "Northern" viewpoint focused more on the "spirit" of Scripture, rather than on the specifics of Scripture. Though these churchmen still held to an orthodox view of the Bible as the Word of God, their approach would open the way for full-blown liberalism on a wide variety of issues, from the role of women, to morality (such as abortion and homosexuality), to salvation itself. The "Southern" perspective continued to affirm the traditional Reformed view, one which did not attempt to explain away what the Bible teaches by means of contextualization, or asserting that what the Biblical authors wrote in Scripture was influenced by their surroundings or by the assumptions of a purportedly unenlightened age.

In addition to the issue of slavery, the particular matter which caused the withdrawal of Southern Presbyterians from the Northern-dominated General Assembly was the passage by that body of the Gardiner Spring Resolutions in 1861. Gardiner Spring was a minister in New York City. Normally a man of conservative views, his commitment to the Federal union in the context of the secession of Southern states proved to be powerful motivation for him to take action in the church court. These resolutions pledged the loyalty of the denomination to the government in Washington, D.C.—something which the men from Dixie could not in conscience do, since their states had seceded from the

United States of America. The adoption of the Spring Resolutions was the final straw. All of the presbyteries from eleven Confederate states withdrew from the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and on December 4, 1861, in Augusta, Georgia, the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America, commonly referred to as the Southern Presbyterian Church, was born.<sup>12</sup>

After the War, the Southern Presbyterian Church changed its official name to the Presbyterian Church in the United States, and the “Northern” and the “Southern” Presbyterian Churches continued their separate existence. In the North, the Old School and New School healed their breach by reuniting in 1870; the New School Southerners had already joined the Southern Presbyterian Church in 1864.

## 6. The Rise of Liberalism among the Protestant Churches

The rise of liberalism within American Protestantism revolves around two great issues: Biblical criticism, and the “social gospel”. Of course, these are always the basic issues, and the ones which, as twentieth century philosopher Francis Schaeffer noted, distinguish the faithful church from the unfaithful church: Scripture and gospel.

The attack on the Bible is seen best within American Presbyterianism with respect to the Charles Briggs case. In 1891, Prof. Briggs gave an inaugural lecture at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. In it, he promoted the idea of Biblical criticism. Efforts to discipline him in his home presbytery, New York, failed—a commentary on how influential he was and how far liberalism had infiltrated the Presbyterian Church by the late nineteenth century. The failure of New York Presbytery to find him guilty was overturned by the General Assembly, which found him guilty and suspended him.

Nevertheless, Union Seminary continued to supply many of those who would be ordained to the Presbyterian ministry, and this would lead to the liberalization of the denomination as a whole.

The other major issue was the “social gospel”. Championed by Walter Rauschenbusch, this perspective subordinated the traditional emphasis on individual salvation to a societal approach. Specifically, sin and redemption were regarded by Rauschenbusch as applying only with regard to “suprapersonal entities”, such as economic and political structures. Accordingly, things such as poverty and social injustice take center stage. Predictably, then, the social gospel tended in a socialistic direction.

## 7. The Modernist-Fundamentalist Controversy

The fighting over the social gospel and over Biblical criticism eventually led to the Modernist-fundamentalist battle in the twentieth century.

All of the “mainline” Protestant churches, particularly in the Northern states—including, of course, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America—experienced a fight over the meaning of the gospel and the nature of Scripture. Some historians might point to the rise of leftist political movements, such as Populism, Progressivism, and Socialism, as the reason for this development. However, we would argue that those social and political movements gained ground especially because of what was going on in the various churches. In other words, the assumptions which informed the church theologically and doctrinally led to the radical politics in the society. At the same time, of course, there was what we might call a symbiotic relationship—as the society became filled with radical political ideas, these ideas seeped back into the church and furthered the leftward drift of the churches.

In many ways, the “declaration of war” can be found in Harry Emerson Fosdick’s infamous sermon, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” Fosdick was a minister with Baptist credentials, who was preaching at First Presbyterian Church in New York City. In May 1922, Fosdick threw down the gauntlet:

It is interesting to note where the Fundamentalists are driving in their stakes to mark out the deadline of doctrine around the church, across which no one is to pass except on terms of agreement. They insist that we must all believe in the historicity of certain special miracles, preeminently the virgin birth of our Lord; that we must believe in a special theory of inspiration—that the original documents of the Scripture, which of course we no longer possess, were inerrantly dictated to men a good deal as a man might dictate to a stenographer; that we must believe in a special theory of the Atonement—that the blood of our Lord, shed in a substitutionary death, placates an alienated Deity and makes possible welcome for the returning sinner; and that we must believe in the second coming of our Lord upon the clouds of heaven to set up a millennium here, as the only way in which God can bring history to a worthy denouement. Such are some of the stakes which are being driven to mark a deadline of doctrine around the church.

If a man is a genuine liberal, his primary protest is not against holding these opinions, although he may well protest against their being considered the fundamentals of Christianity. This is a free country and anybody has a right to hold these opinions or any others if he is sincerely convinced of them. The question is—Has anybody a right to deny the Christian name to those who differ with him on such points and to shut against them the doors of the Christian fellowship? The Fundamentalists say that this must be done. In this country and on the foreign field they are trying to do it. They have actually endeavored to put on the statute books of a whole state binding laws against teaching modern biology. If they had their way, within the church, they would set up in Protestantism a doctrinal tribunal more rigid than the pope’s.

Notice three things. One is that this sermon represents a deliberate attack on historic

Christianity. The doctrines of the virgin birth, the inspiration of Scripture, and the substitutionary atonement are foundational to the Christian faith. There can be no compromise on them. Another thing to note is that Fosdick conflates a belief in the literal second coming of Christ, with a notion of premillennialism. The two, of course, are not synonymous, though perhaps he can be forgiven the confusion given that many premillennialists have asserted that not believing in a literal thousand year reign of Christ after His return is tantamount to a rejection of His actual *parousia*. And the third point to take note of is that Fosdick makes an appeal to the American ideal of freedom not only to foster free expression in the society but to promote pluralism in the institutional church.

In the “Northern” Presbyterian Church, the “fundamentalists”, for awhile, had the upper hand. This can be seen, for example, in the 1924 General Assembly instructions to the Presbytery of New York that Fosdick either be examined properly, or cease his preaching from a Presbyterian pulpit. In addition, the 1910, 1916, and 1923 General Assemblies approved the five “fundamentals” of the faith: the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture; the virgin birth of Christ; His substitutionary atonement; His bodily resurrection; and the historicity of His miracles. These fundamentals were declared to be essential for ordination in the Presbyterian Church.<sup>13</sup>

However, that situation was not bound to last. For one thing, the liberals fought back with what was called the Auburn Affirmation—a document that argued that the General Assembly had no authority to go beyond the adopted Constitution, including the Confession of Faith and Catechisms, in such a way as to bind the consciences of its members or officers. The Auburn Affirmation also stated that the fundamentalist positions on things such as the virgin birth and the atonement of Christ were merely theories, which no minister was obliged to adopt. Also, it rejected the notion of Biblical inerrancy. At least 1274 presbyters signed this document.<sup>14</sup>

It was in that context that the conservatives at the 1925 General Assembly blinked. The Assembly unanimously voted to establish a committee to study the unrest in the church. Instead of taking definitive action to uphold orthodoxy and to protect the sheep, the denomination voted to study the matter. We may remember that that was not the position of the Apostle Paul: he counseled the elders at Ephesus that they needed to be on guard against “savage wolves” who would not spare the flock (Acts 20). The Lord Jesus likewise issued warnings against hypocritical and overbearing religious leaders, whom He called a brood of vipers. The Christian position is not to negotiate with wolves and poisonous snakes. But remember, this was an age of seeking conciliation, as in the League of Nations (championed by President Woodrow Wilson, who was raised in a Southern Presbyterian manse); it was an era which produced the Kellogg-Briand pact (1928), which renounced war as an instrument of public policy. Surely, if the nations

---

13

See Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church: A Study of Theological Issues in the Presbyterian Church Since 1869* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954), pp. 98, 110, 119.

14

*Ibid.*, p. 117.

were determined to get along with each other, then why couldn't churchmen get along?

Of course, this policy of appeasement was destined to fail. Two cannot walk together, unless they be agreed. And there is a logic to each system of thought, which must ultimately drive out competing systems of thought. Such a development was not long in coming.

The controversy in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. had repercussions at its premier seminary, Princeton. Long a bastion of Calvinist orthodoxy, pressure mounted for it not to be a prophetic voice in an increasingly liberal denomination, but to reflect the pluralism.

That leads us to consider one of the most colorful churchmen of the twentieth century, J. Gresham Machen. Born in 1881 in Baltimore, Maryland, and raised in a Southern Presbyterian congregation, Machen attended Princeton Seminary and began teaching there in 1906. He was an accomplished Greek scholar, whose Greek grammar is still being published. His writings on the New Testament as well as on other subjects, such as *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, are still consulted for their scholarship. His *Christianity and Liberalism*, published in 1923, was hailed even by unbelievers as a brilliant analysis of the contrast between historic Christianity and liberal Christianity. Indeed, in Machen's view, so-called liberal Christianity was not Christian at all, and was a totally different type of religion—one which rejected the supernatural, such as the resurrection of Christ and His virgin birth. More than that, this so-called liberalism was not liberal in the classical sense, in that it was closed-minded and unwilling to be open to other ideas, as well as not very tolerant of other views. If Machen were writing a bumper sticker, it would have read, "Liberal Christianity is neither."

Unlike most seminary professors, he did not confine himself to the ivory tower of academia, but got involved in the ecclesiastical battles of the day.

His designation by Princeton Seminary as a professor of apologetics proved to be controversial, and was held up while the General Assembly appointed a committee to study the causes of unrest at the venerable institution. As a result of that report, Princeton Seminary was reorganized, with the result that two men who had signed the Auburn Affirmation were placed on the new board. This represented an intolerable situation for Prof. Machen. He resigned his professorship at Princeton, and was instrumental in founding Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia in 1929.

The new seminary faced numerous challenges from the very start, not least of which was the effect of the Stock Market crash of October 1929 and the resultant Great Depression. Nevertheless, it quickly established itself as the theological heir of Old Princeton.

But Machen, as we noted, was not an ivory tower theologian. In the 1930s, he fought

against the liberalism that had crept into the PCUSA's Board of Foreign Missions. The major treatise in favor of a modernist approach was *Re-Thinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry After One Hundred Years*, published in 1932 and associated with the philosopher William Ernest Hocking. The poster woman for this heretical perspective was Pearl S. Buck, a Northern Presbyterian missionary in China whose *The Good Earth* would win a Pulitzer prize for literature in 1932. Even though the Board of Foreign Missions distanced itself from *Re-Thinking Missions*, it did not demand the resignation of Pearl Buck, who was staunchly in favor of it. The failure by the missions board and later the PCUSA General Assembly to take a hard line against modernism led Machen to spearhead the founding of the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions, since he and others could not, in good conscience, support the denominational agency when there was no guarantee that funds given to it would necessarily be used to promote the true gospel. The 1934 General Assembly reacted to this development by concluding that participation in this rival missions agency was inconsistent with ordination vows. The Presbytery of New Brunswick, of which Machen had been a member, ordered him to resign from the independent board, and when he refused to do so, he was tried and suspended from the ministry. Upon appeal to the Synod of New Jersey and to the General Assembly, that verdict was upheld. As a result of this judicial action, Machen and others in 1936 established a new denomination, today known as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC).

J. Gresham Machen, we would contend, is one of the most significant figures not only in church history, but in American history, for three reasons. One, he was the intellectual champion of American fundamentalism. This is not to say that Machen was a fundamentalist himself, in the sense of believing in only the five fundamentals—he held to so much more doctrine, including the Calvinism of the Westminster Standards. Nevertheless, he did adhere to the foundational doctrines which Fundamentalism professed, and, unlike so many fundamentalists, he was knowledgeable and trained as a scholar. Two, he epitomized the conflict between Modernism and traditional values. This was true not only with regard to religious doctrine, but also political, social, and cultural matters. His commitment to Jeffersonian ideals of freedom and de-centralization went contrary to the spirit of the age—an age which witnessed the rise of totalitarianism in Europe, and the New Deal in America. Machen stood, almost as a solitary figure, almost as a Luther, *contra mundum*—against the world. Three, Machen is significant because he lost—he lost the seminary, and he lost the denomination. When Princeton fell, and when the PCUSA was captured by the Modernists, there were ripple effects in terms of American society, which veered more decisively in a leftward and irreligious direction. This is not to say that this leftist bias developed overnight—like many intellectual movements, it comes over a period of time, as the logic of certain presuppositions works itself through the body, like yeast gradually leavening a loaf of bread. Nevertheless, the events surrounding J. Gresham Machen were decisive. Like a weakened piece of metal that finally comes to a breaking point, J. Gresham Machen's plight represented a catastrophic failure.

## 8. The Southern Presbyterian Church

The driving out of the strong conservatives from the Northern Presbyterian Church did not result immediately in a similar withdrawal by conservatives from the Presbyterian Church in the United States (or Southern Presbyterian Church). However, the fight was on for the soul of the Southern Church. Although Presbyterianism in Dixie was more conservative than its Northern counterpart, liberalism was still on the march, and the battle was joined. In 1942, Dr. L. Nelson Bell, a medical missionary to China who would later become the father-in-law of Billy Graham, helped to found the *Southern Presbyterian Journal* (later known as the *Presbyterian Journal*) in order to expose the increasing support in church courts for heterodox views, particularly with respect to Scripture and gospel.

One of the major issues faced by the Southern Church was whether to merge with the more liberal “Northern” Presbyterian Church. Various union efforts were tried over the decades. The first one with the most likelihood of success occurred in 1954, when there was a three-way proposal which would have brought together the PCUSA, the PCUS, and the United Presbyterian Church in North America (UPCNA). While the PCUSA and the United Presbyterian Church approved the proposal, the PCUS presbyteries voted it down. Four years later, in 1958, the PCUSA and the UPCNA did unite to form the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA).

But the stopping of merger with the Northern Church did not stop an increasing liberalism in the Southern Church, fueled especially by new graduates of the four PCUS seminaries. In 1971, four organizations—the *Presbyterian Journal*, Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship, Concerned Presbyterians (a layman’s organization), and Presbyterian Churchmen United—formed a Steering Committee for a Continuing Presbyterian Church and announced that a new, conservative denomination would indeed be formed. That event occurred on December 4, 1973—112 years to the day from the founding of the Southern Presbyterian Church—when the denomination now known as the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) came into being.<sup>15</sup>

## 9. The Situation Today

So, where is Reformed theology today in America? Let us first consider it with respect to the liberal denominations, such as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which have Calvinistic roots. In these leftist denominations, Reformed theology—at least such as would be recognized by Calvin, Knox, the authors of the Westminster Standards, Hodge, Thornwell, Dabney, and Machen—is fundamentally not to be found. To employ an analogy, the mighty ship which went by the name “Reformed” has long since sunk, though there are lifeboats, in the form of smaller denominations, which have been launched.

As we look at those smaller branches of the church, the one that stands out is the

Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), which since its founding has enjoyed significant growth and now boasts close to 350,000 members in approximately 1500 congregations. Other denominations professing allegiance to the Bible as the Word of God include the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC), founded in 1981; the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC); the Bible Presbyterian Church (BPC); the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARPC); the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA); the Reformed Church in the United States (RCUS), which represents the German Reformed tradition; the Protestant Reformed Churches; the Heritage Reformed Congregations; and the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA), which was formed out of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) because of its increasing liberalism. There are also smaller groups, constituting what has been called the “micro-denominational” scene, such as the Reformed Presbyterian Church—Hanover Presbytery; the Presbyterian Reformed Church (PRC); the Reformed Presbyterian Church in the United States (RPCUS); and the Reformed Presbyterian Church General Assembly (RPCGA). There are also ethnically based groups, particularly among Koreans, but also among other ethnicities, such as the Reformed Church of Quebec, which is Francophone. In one sense, these various groupings demonstrate the vitality of the Reformed faith. Furthermore, there are expressions of Reformed ecumenicity, as seen, for example, in the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC), which boasts twelve member denominations. On the other hand, the fact that these groups cannot come together in organic union is scandalous, revealing the split nature of the Calvinistic movement.

Between these groups and sometimes within them, there are profound differences. To take one example, consider the PCA. Today in the PCA, multiple positions on the doctrine of creation are tolerated. This variety extends way past the issue of the days of Genesis 1, to the notion of theistic evolution and even the denial of the historic understanding of Adam and Eve.<sup>16</sup> Other deviant theology can also be found. One of

The BioLogos Foundation, an organization committed to trying to harmonize the Bible and science, “affirms that evolution is a means by which God providentially achieves God’s purposes.” Further, “We acknowledge the challenge of providing an account of origins that does full justice both to science and to the biblical record. Based on our discussions, we affirm that there are several options that can achieve this synthesis, including some which involve a historical couple, Adam and Eve, and that embrace the compelling conclusions that the earth is more than four billion years old and that all species on this planet are historically related through the process of evolution. We commit ourselves to spreading the word about such harmonious accounts of truth that God has revealed in the Bible and through science” (Summary Statement, Theology of Celebration, II, November 9-11, 2010). Among the signatories to this statement are at least three PCA ministers: Dr. Ron Choong, Director of the Academy for Christian Thought in New York City; Dr. Tim Keller, well-known founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City; and Dr. Luder Whitlock, former President of Reformed Theological Seminary. Dr. Choong has stated: “The Westminster Confession contradicts the Scriptural description of a mortal Adam who had not yet eaten of the tree of life and who only knew of good and evil after he had eaten of the forbidden tree. In the WCF, Chapter IV.2, Adam is created with an ‘immortal soul’. Neither Matthew 10:28 nor Luke 23:42 referred to Adam but to the post-Fall humans who can inherit everlasting life. Adam was not created with an immortal soul (Genesis 3:22).” He added: “Adam was likely to be physiologically anatomically modern human (AMH) but certainly not alone among AMHs. His distinction was that he was the first AMH in the line of Jesus who was formed in the image of God” (“Who is the Adam of the Christian Confession?”, Faith Seeking

the most crucial areas has to do with a movement that has been called the New Perspective on Paul, along with the closely-related Federal Vision. The advocates of the Federal Vision challenge the historic Protestant view of justification by faith alone, deny the distinction between the visible and the invisible church, and embrace views of baptism that are more aligned with Roman Catholicism than with Calvinism.<sup>17</sup> With respect to worship, all kinds of weird practices are allowed and often promoted by ecclesiastical bureaucracy and theological seminaries. Liturgical dance and drama, video clips, women reading Scripture, and other innovations are often found in PCA worship. To use a pop culture phrase, “Attending a PCA worship service is like a box of chocolates—you never know what you’re going to get.”

#### 10. What About the Future?

Of course, we cannot predict the future—only God knows what the morrow may hold. Will He be merciful and send revival and reformation to America? Or, will He pour out His just anger upon a society that has squandered its spiritual—indeed, in large measure, its Reformed—heritage?

However, even though we cannot know what will happen, we can still do what we can in order to honor the Lord Jesus and seek to promote His kingdom and glory. Let me suggest several ways in which we can do this.

- (1) First, we must ourselves be faithful, no matter what temptation or persecution may come our way.
- (2) Secondly, we must be knowledgeable of our theological heritage. We must know what we believe and why we believe it.
- (3) Thirdly, we must train those for whom we have responsibility—whether in church

---

Understanding blogspot). He has written on the same site: “If the biblical account of what we call the fall can be understood as ‘rising beasts’, ‘falling upwards’ to moral awareness, it would make better sense of biological evolution, theodicy and the human condition” (“A transformative, evolutionary doctrine of creation”). Rachel Miller, in evaluating Dr. Choong’s 2011 publication *The Bible You Thought You Knew: Volume 1*, summarizes his views this way: “Moses didn’t write Genesis, Genesis was written as a polemic against the Babylonian gods, Genesis does not teach *ex nihilo* creation, Genesis does not speak to how the universe began or where humans came from, Adam is best understood as a group of hominids adopted by God to be *imago dei*, Adam and Eve were not created with perfect morality, Paul’s Adam wasn’t necessarily the singular progenitor of the human race, Noah’s flood was an adopted ANE [Ancient Near Eastern] story retold for Israel’s purposes, the Tower of Babel doesn’t explain the origin of languages, and interpreting the Bible literally can be dangerous” (“Ron Choong and Project Timothy: The Bible You Thought You Knew,” June 12, 2012, A Daughter of the Reformation website). In October 2011, Dr. Peter Enns, former Old Testament professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, addressed a group of ministers from the PCA’s Metro New York Presbytery “on the problem of evolution and Adam”. In his speech, he made the case that Adam cannot plausibly be regarded as an historical figure, but rather metaphorically (“Talking to Pastors about Adam and Evolution: Options,” [www.patheos.com](http://www.patheos.com)).

17

The PCA General Assembly in 2008 condemned the Federal Vision (“Report of Ad Interim Study Committee on Federal Vision, New Perspective, and Auburn Avenue Theologies”, adopted by the 35<sup>th</sup> PCA General Assembly). Nevertheless, advocates of Federal Vision theology are still in the PCA ministry.

or in our family. We must hold up the great heroes of the faith as examples to our children, so that they will be inspired to follow in their train.

- (4) Fourthly, those of us who are ordained must be involved in the courts of the church, faithfully reminding our brethren of the heritage with which we have been entrusted.

This last point—that of reminding our brethren in church courts of our blessed heritage, and the first point—that of ourselves remaining faithful, no matter what temptation or persecution may come, illustrate the reality that often in a church battle over orthodoxy, there are not two groups, but at least three: there are the conservatives, who understand the church’s theology and its paramount importance; there are the modernists, who hate that theology and who work to undermine it; and there are the so-called moderates, who desperately want peace at any price. The reason why the Northern Presbyterian Church was captured by the liberals is because people who did not personally hold to modernist theology—that is, the so-called middle-of-the-roaders—ultimately made common cause with the liberals for the sake of “peace”. In doing so, they did not realize that that type of “peace” is not genuine, nor did they realize that it will not last.<sup>18</sup> A recent example can be seen with regard to the issue of homosexuality in the PC(USA). When that denomination decided to erect a committee to study the matter, it was named the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity. Did you catch the problem with the very name? The Bible tells us that wisdom is *first* pure, *then* peaceable. If we reverse the order, then we are acting as if we are wiser than God. If we reverse the order, we end up with disaster, as we see today with regard to the PC(USA).

Reformed theology in America, considered in its historical aspect—what a glorious thing! What an amazing display of God’s goodness! What a demonstration of the transcendent nature of the truth, with the Reformed church featuring people of various ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds.

Reformed theology in America today—what a mess! What an incredible display of ignorance and stupidity by those who have sold their heritage for a mess of pottage.

Reformed theology in America for the future—what an opportunity! What a wonderful opportunity for men and women to take up the cross and follow their sovereign Lord.

From the blood-stained coasts of Florida where the Huguenots, who first brought Calvinism to these shores, became martyrs, to New England where the Puritans hewed a Christian commonwealth out of the wilderness, to the South where preachers rode circuits on horseback, to the West where pioneer missionaries braved the elements and the Indians, to the great urban areas of today where Koreans and Sudanese and Filipinos and Chinese organize churches, the Reformed faith continues its march through America. The persistence and the growth of Calvinism constitute an enduring theme. That is the story of Reformed theology in America.

