

The Presbyterian Civil War

Introduction

- Acknowledgement: Our lessons in this class summarize material drawn from D.G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking a Better Country: 300 Years of American Presbyterianism*. Quotes are from the same.
- Definition: Presbyterianism is a branch of Protestantism that embraces biblical Reformation not just for our theology of *salvation*, but also for our theology of *worship* and our theology of *church government*.
- Goal: By understanding the story of our branch of the Christian family, we will be better equipped to learn from the past, to understand the emphases and tensions of the present, and to live faithfully in the future.

Review: from Revolution to Revivalism

- In the lead-up to the American Revolution, the Presbyterian Church tried to take a moderating position between loyalty to the British king *and* loyalty to the Continental Congress. But by the end of the war, the Presbyterian Church had set moderation aside and celebrated the American victory.
- As settlement expanded across the western frontier, old Scottish Presbyterian practices of “communion seasons” contributed to the formation of revivalist “camp meetings,” and revivalist Presbyterians such as Barton Stone and Charles Finney began introducing “new measures” such as the “altar call.”
- In the 1820s-1830s, during the Second Great Awakening, Presbyterians became advocates of numerous missionary (Bible and tract societies) and social causes (abolition, prison reform, temperance, etc.).
- Through this time, Presbyterians went from ‘orphans’ to those with significant political/social influence.

How did Presbyterians seek to work with other denominations on the American Frontier?

- In 1801, the American Presbyterians and New England Congregationalists enacted a “Plan of Union.”
- This was not a total denominational merger, but rather a treaty for church-planting in the upper Midwest.
- Rather than have each denomination try to plant churches in frontier settlements, they would cooperate to form “union congregations” in which both Presbyterians and Congregationalists would worship together.
- If a problem should arise with members or ministers, discipline would follow Presbyterian procedure for the Presbyterians, and Congregational procedure for the Congregationalists.
- In retrospect, this plan looks problematic from the outset. However, at the time there was a significant reservoir of goodwill between these denominations – partly from their cooperation during the War.

What was “New England Theology”?

- Historically, the Congregationalists of New England and Presbyterians had a shared theological heritage.
- “New England Theology” was a development in which influential Congregationalist ministers such as Samuel Hopkins (1721-1803) and Nathaniel Taylor (1786-1858) began to depart from historic Christian and Reformational teachings. There were two main departures:
 - Denial of “original sin.” Although New England Theology believed that all people sin, it denied that we inherit our guilt and sinful nature from Adam.
 - Denial of “substitutionary atonement.” New England Theology denied the historic and Reformational understanding that Jesus died as a substitute – suffering for the specific sins of every Christian who had or ever would live. Instead, it taught that God could forgive sins without punishment – but in order to set a public example of God’s displeasure against sin, Jesus died on the cross.
- By 1830, New England Theology had gained a foothold in American Presbyterian circles, despite the fact that its two main tenets directly contradict the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (cf. WCF 6.3, 8.5).
- Alarmed, conservative Presbyterians called for “a general waking up of the *old school Presbyterians*.”
- Those who did not fall into this “Old School” group came to be known as “New School” Presbyterians.

How did tensions over revivalism and New England Theology split the Presbyterian Church?

- In 1837, the “Old School” had a majority at the General Assembly – and took radical action:
 - Cancelled the 1801 Plan of Union,
 - Published a declaration of 16 errors of the New England Theology, *and*
 - Kicked 4 entire synods out of the denomination! (28 presbyteries, 509 ministers, ~60k members).
- Furious at this, the “New School” Presbyterians called for its adherents to ignore the 1837 actions...
- In 1838, these tensions finally erupted into outright schism:
 - The 1838 General Assembly was scheduled to meet at Seventh Church in Philadelphia...
 - The Old School delegates arrived first, took all the seats at the front, and locked the front doors!
 - This had the effect of making the New School delegates find seats at the back of the church...
 - When one of the New School delegates (from a presbytery that had been kicked out in 1837) arose and tried to have his attendance recorded, the moderator declared, “Sir, we do not know you.”
 - Chaos ensued... and the New School held its own General Assembly *at the back* of Seventh Church.

How did the separate “New School” and “Old School” Churches develop before the Civil War?

- In general, the New School developed along transformational lines – continuing to advocate for social reforms such as Sabbath observance and temperance. In the 1830s, churches began switch from wine to grape juice for communion. By 1840, the General Assembly required total abstinence from alcohol.
- In general, the Old School developed along theological lines – especially coming to emphasize an idea known as the “spirituality of the church.” The idea here is twofold. First, the church’s power is *spiritual* rather than *civil*: the church ministers and declares God’s Word, but it has no legal jurisdiction or power. Second, the church’s spiritual authority is limited to what *the Holy Spirit wrote in Scripture*: it must not go beyond what is written, and must not bind a believer’s conscience without biblical warrant.

How did slavery and the Civil War split both the Old School and the New School?

- In 1818, before the Old/New School split, the General Assembly denounced the practice of “voluntary enslaving” as inconsistent with Christ’s command to love our neighbor as ourselves. While it resisted a call for immediate abolition as too disruptive, it did call for “total abolition” as soon as possible.
- In the lead-up to and onset of the Civil War, both Old and New School experienced splits:
 - 1857: Southern New Schoolers split away after their Assembly denounces slavery as intolerable.
 - 1861: Meeting five weeks after the Civil War began, the Old School Assembly declared its support for the Federal government; by December, southern Old Schoolers had their own Assembly.

How did the Civil War cause realignment and theological hardening among American Presbyterians?

- At the outset of the Civil War, there were four major bodies of American Presbyterians...
- In 1863, the northern Old School Assembly voted to fly the Union Flag over the church where it met.
- In 1864, the southern Presbyterians had reunited into the Presbyterian Church (CSA) – which after the war renamed itself the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS).
- After the Emancipation Proclamation, the 1864 PCCSA Assembly declared “the peculiar mission of the Southern Church to conserve the institution of slavery, and to make it a blessing both to master and slave.”
- In 1869, the northern Presbyterians reunited as the Presbyterian Church (USA).
- Critically, the northern and southern churches *remained separate for a more than century* (until 1983).

What big lessons can we learn from this period?

- Church union without *both* a shared theological vision *and* strong accountability leads to trouble.
- New vs. Old School – it is very possible for Christians to pursue godly goals in an ungodly manner.
- Civil War & Slavery – surrounding culture exercises a potent influence on theological convictions.