

AMERICAN PRESBYTERIANISM

MODERN CHURCH HISTORY –SPRING 2024

OLD SIDE VS. NEW SIDE

- Early American Presbyterians debated the dangers and merits of the first Great Awakening.
- “Old Side” Presbyterians believed that traveling preachers and tent meetings were disrupting the peace and order of local churches. They advocated formal training for ministers and strict subscription to the Westminster Standards.
- “New Side” Presbyterians were heavily influenced by Pietism. They advocated for ministers and church members to experience a “new birth” conversion.
- Gilbert Tennant preached a sermon claiming that many of the Old Side ministers were “blind guides and Pharisees”.
- Scores of churches split over this debate, but the two sides coexisted. Both sides planted churches and evangelized the colonies.
- The French and Indian War facilitated an end to the feud, with the two sides reuniting in 1758.
- The first General Assembly met in Philadelphia in 1789.

OLD SCHOOL VS NEW SCHOOL

- In 1824, a man name Charles Finney was ordained as an evangelist by his Presbytery in upstate New York.
- Finney developed what he called “new measures” in his revival meetings. Instead of waiting for God to pour out His Spirit in revival, Finney believed revival could be created by practical means.
- His favorite measure was called the “anxious bench”. People could come to the front of the church where the bench was and receive prayer. They could also enter into personal conversation with the preacher and the pressure of this public position would often cause people to “give in to Jesus.” Charles Spurgeon, a contemporary of Finney, rightly questioned the sincerity of such conversions in the long haul.
- Finney encouraged interdenominational cooperation and social reform, including abolition of slavery. Finney’s theology also varied a great deal from the Westminster Standards – particularly his views on sin, free will, and conversion.
- In 1837, the Presbyterian Church divided into two “schools” – Old and New. The New School was mostly northern churches who sided with Finney.
- Slavery was, of course, an important context for this split. Methodists also split over slavery in 1837. Baptists split in 1845. But there were slave owners and abolitionists in both Old and New School churches. Both schools split again at the start of the Civil War.

- After the Civil War, the previous issues no longer seemed important. Old and New Schools reunited in both North and South forming two denominations (PCUSA and PCUS).

LIBERAL VS CONSERVATIVE

- In 1937, the Northern PCUSA split again. Led by Gresham Machen, conservatives left to form the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.
- This split occurred after years of attempting to correct theological liberalism in the denomination, which was no longer committed to the inerrancy of Scripture.
- The southern church split much later, in 1973 with the formation of the PCA (our denomination).
- The remaining liberal churches in the old southern church reunited with the northern church in 1983.

WHAT'S NEXT?

- There are currently 17 Presbyterian denominations in the United States. Most are very small. The four largest are PCUSA, PCA, EPC, and ECO.
- The largest Presbyterian denomination in the world is actually in Mexico! NPC Mexico has 6,000 churches and 2.8 million members! It is conservative, Calvinist, and growing rapidly!
- The PCUSA is in rapid decline. Since 1965, the mainline church has dropped from 4 million members to 1 million. One third of the members are over 70. Half are over 55.
- In 1973, the PCA began with 40,000 members and 200 churches. We now have 400,000 members and 2,000 churches.
- Even so, there are camps within the PCA that threaten unity. Some of the same historical debates remain:
 - o Doctrinalists vs. Pietists vs. Culturalists
 - o Strict subscription vs Good-Faith subscription
 - o Social Reform
 - o Uniformity vs. Unity

“During the last five to six years, the entire nation has become more polarized politically and culturally. No matter your position, the alternative viewpoints to yours have become louder, stronger, and more extreme in society. Some are seeking to re-read the ‘strict’ and ‘broad’ groups as being the same as — and as connected to — the conservatives and progressives that are battling in the culture wars on the national stage. For example, many now want to name the broader PCA group ‘progressives’ and tie them to the activism of the secular Left. If a PCA church emphasizes helping the poor or disadvantaged, it may be said they are ‘into critical race theory.’

What matters of course is to be biblical and Reformed, not to position ourselves on some changing spectrum of political-cultural beliefs. However, a minister who believes women should not be ordained elders, who believes in the inerrancy of Scripture, who believes in orthodox Reformed theology, who believes some people are predestined from all eternity to be damned, who believes people are going to hell if they don’t believe savingly in Jesus, who believes homosexual practice and desire are sin, who believes we are all descended from a real, specially created Adam and Eve — is not progressive by any fair use of the English language or by any understanding of cultural reality.

It is not true that the PCA is in imminent danger of becoming a progressive, mainline Protestant church.

I think the sooner we lay that new “narrative” to rest the better, and the sooner we can get back to our real work. We must seek the spiritual health, scriptural integrity, ministry effectiveness, and unity of the church. And we must do it together — in the face of our long-time differences on how we read and practice the Westminster Standards.

How can we do that?

First, we should acknowledge how much doctrinal unity we really have. We have a remarkable amount of consensus. There’s more than enough common ground doctrinally upon which to build a denomination. Are we willing to admit that?

Second, we should acknowledge the complexity of the reasons of why we really differ. The reasons are temperamental, cultural, and historical as well as hermeneutical.

Third, all revivals and renewals begin with repentance. We should stop judging one another’s motives so readily — the strict assuming the broad are worldly and the broad assuming the strict are legalistic. We must repent and forgive each other.

Fourth, we need far more face-to-face conversations — not social media or internet debates. If we did, it would make a difference. For example, before we post our articles and thoughts online, we might be more likely to run them by brothers and friends in the other “camp” first (as I did this article).”

- Tim Keller, “What’s Happening in the PCA?” – By Faith Magazine, March 21, 2022