

TURNING POINTS IN AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN HISTORY

PART 3: OLD SIDE VERSUS NEW SIDE, 1741-1758

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Almost like clockwork, once every hundred years or so, American Presbyterians have endured a major division in their ranks, resulting in the formation of two separate denominations.

Most Orthodox Presbyterians are aware of their own break with the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. in 1936 under the leadership of J. Gresham Machen. Many are also aware of the split in 1837 between the Old School and the New School (still to be featured in this series). Few, however, know much about the split between the Old Side and the New Side Presbyterians.

That split occurred in 1741, only thirty-five years after the formation of the Presbytery of Philadelphia. It pitted the anti-revival Old Side against the pro-revival New Side. But the pro-revival party could not claim the mantle of conservative Presbyterianism, as has often been thought. The revivalists were generally the innovators (if one can be novel in a church so young), while their Old Side opponents were not the proto-liberals that many have assumed them to be.

The differences that emerged over the nature and value of subscription at the time of the Adopting Act of 1729 (see part 2 of this series) revealed two types of piety within the young Presbyterian communion. On the one side, many Presbyterians to the north of Philadelphia, in New Jersey and New York, who shared theological sympathies with New England, were less enthusiastic about subscription than their Scotch-Irish and Southeastern Pennsylvania peers. For the Presbyterians of New England descent, subscription was a violation of the liberty of conscience, a way of binding the conscience with the words of men rather than the yoke of Christ.

On the other side, those Presbyterians who were recent immigrants to the New World and generally of Scotch-Irish descent, having settled in Philadelphia and beyond to Chester and New Castle, believed subscription to be valuable for protecting the church from error among her ministers. Creedal subscription had become the practice in the Old World, and these pro-subscriptionist Presbyterians held that it should also be the practice in America.

The revivals that broke out during the First Great Awakening only contributed to this relatively minor tension. Smaller awakenings had already occurred locally in 1729 among the Dutch Reformed in northern New Jersey under the ministry of Theodore Freylinghuysen, and then again among New England Congregationalists in 1735 under Jonathan Edwards's preaching. Presbyterians also experienced the effects of these local revivals firsthand, when Gilbert Tennent followed the example of Freylinghuysen and began to preach the "terrors of the law" to Presbyterians in Pennsylvania in the 1730s. These minor awakenings turned into a *great* one when George Whitefield visited North America in 1739. His itinerancy and powerful preaching caused an immediate sensation that in turn generated controversy within the churches and also in the broader society.

Whitefield complicated the tension that existed between those Presbyterians who favored subscription and those who did not. Three specific issues emerged between 1739 and 1741, and not one of them had to do with the gospel and its denial or with the personal holiness of Presbyterian

ministers, as some have claimed. Instead, all three concerned the nature and authority of the Christian ministry.

The first issue that Whitefield's revivals brought to a head was the question of itinerancy. Whitefield perfected the practice of itinerant preaching, that is, of traveling from place to place, speaking to crowds of believers and unchurched people anywhere-whether inside a church building or outside in the market square or out in a pasture. But itinerancy had been an issue before his arrival. The specific conflict stemmed from pastors, such as Gilbert Tennent, who went into a community and began to preach without the invitation of the local pastor. Revivalists felt justified in so doing because souls were at stake. Established pastors, however, rightly considered such preaching as a rebuke to their own ministry. After all, if a church was already in place with a duly ordained minister, why were the revivalists necessary?

A second issue, much related to Gilbert Tennent, concerned the proper training of pastors. William Tennent, Sr., with support from his sons, had founded the Log College just north of Philadelphia in 1735 as a "school of the prophets." It was a forerunner of the American Protestant seminary, and schooled its students in revivalistic Presbyterianism. Many of the pastors in Philadelphia and southeastern Pennsylvania, who were Scottish or Scotch-Irish, had trained at Scottish universities. Accordingly, they put a premium on European educational standards. For some of those opposed to revivals, the issue of theological education was a smoke screen, since it gave conservatives a way of opposing the Log College men without addressing the issue of revivalism itself. Still, the Log College raised important questions about the proper theological education for ordination.

Here the second issue, theological education, merged with the third, qualifications for ordination. The pro-revivalist party, led by the Tennents, insisted that candidates for ordination give evidence of a conversion experience. Presbyterian conservatives, such as John Thomson, the author of *The Government of the Church of Christ* (1741), disagreed. They argued that presbyteries could well dispense with such personal questions since licentiates were coming before presbytery as church members. Instead, church officers needed to consider during ordination exams how well trained candidates for the ministry were. Log College graduates were suspect, in the conservatives' view, because they were better schooled in experimental religion than in Calvinist dogma. Related to this debate was the older one about subscription. Those who took a softer view of subscription tended to stress the need for ministers to give evidence of a personal religious experience. Those who thought that the creeds gave the church proper boundaries wanted to hear candidates' understanding of theology, not their personal testimonies.

These matters came to a head in 1740, when Gilbert Tennent preached the controversial sermon, "The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry." He accused those who were critical of revivals of being unconverted—a group that included those who had plausible scruples about itinerancy, the Log College, and the necessity of ministerial candidates to relate a conversion experience. Tennent also encouraged church members to flee the congregations of such anti-revival ministers and find safe ecclesiastical havens.

Thomson shot back by asserting that ministers and presbyteries had legitimate authority, delegated by Christ, to execute the Christian ministry. Tennent and other pro-revival Presbyterians were usurping Christ's authority by either refusing to submit to the judgments of presbytery or synod, or by telling church members to resist the ministrations of their own pastors. "The relation between a

minister of the gospel and his flock, yea and every person belonging to it," Thomson wrote, is "a sacred and religious tie." Revivalism was merely a "newfangled method of religion."

With fighting words like these, a split was inevitable. In May 1741, in a move that foreshadowed the action of the Old School Presbyterians a century later, the Old Side declared that the Presbytery of New Brunswick, the judicatory established as a release valve for Log College graduates, was no longer part of the Synod of Philadelphia. And with that decision, the Old Side and New Side Presbyterians would remain separate until 1758. The Old Side was strongest among the recent Scotch-Irish settlers in the Susquehanna and Shenandoah river valleys and in parts of the Philadelphia region. The New Side prospered in upper New Jersey and the New York City area.

As has often been the case after church splits, a change of personalities brought about the Reunion of 1758. Some of the old antagonists died, and others, like Gilbert Tennent, apologized for their youthful obstreperousness. Even so, the reunion was generally a victory for the New Side. Although the terms affirmed the Old Side's concerns about subscription and the legitimate authority of church officers and judicatories, the Plan of Reunion overwhelmingly affirmed the New Side's understanding of revivals and the piety fostered by them. It stated that candidates for the ministry would have to demonstrate an "experimental acquaintance" with the gospel in addition to having the requisite learning. The Plan also declared that the Great Awakening was "a blessed work of God's Holy Spirit" which was very much at issue at the time of the split.

The Reunion of 1758 was significant, then, for settling the identity of American Presbyterianism. Two versions had vied with each other during the Colonial period, one shaped by pietism (the New Side), the other content with Old World forms of creed and polity (the Old Side). The Plan of Reunion, to be sure, represented a compromise between the two sides, trying to affirm both. But, as the subsequent history of American Presbyterianism would reveal, the combination of pietism and confessionalism is an unstable compound.

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