

TURNING POINTS IN AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN HISTORY

PART 14: CONCLUSION: WITHOUT ILLUSIONS

D. G. Hart and John R. Muether

American Presbyterianism turns three hundred this year. But do we have a heritage worth celebrating? Does the Orthodox Presbyterian Church stand on the shoulders of venerable Presbyterian ancestors? Anniversaries provide a good occasion for reflection, not only on the successes of the past, but also on the failings that the study of the past makes all too obvious.

One way to assess the strength and vitality of American Presbyterianism is to look at membership statistics. In 2001, there were nearly 5.6 million Americans who identified themselves as Presbyterian—the sixth largest religious affiliation in the United States, behind Roman Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, and Pentecostals. But that accounts for only 2 percent of the entire American population. Furthermore, only 49 percent of these Presbyterians attend church weekly. The largest denomination, the mainline Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), has 2.4 million members, which makes it the tenth largest denomination in the United States. However, between 1983 and 2004, that church lost 1.8 million members.

Some of these mainline Presbyterians entered new denominations, such as the Presbyterian Church in America and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. But these denominations have not shown remarkable growth. Since 1999, the PCA has grown from around 300,000 members to approximately 330,000. The EPC ranged between 50,000 and 60,000 during the 1990s, and has now reached 70,000. Meanwhile, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church has been growing slowly in the middle to upper 20,000s.

Whatever these denominational statistics may suggest about Presbyterian realignments in recent decades, they cannot neutralize what is arguably the most sobering historical statistic: namely, that in 1776 Presbyterians accounted for roughly 25 percent of the American population, but 225 years later were a drop in the bucket at 2 percent. Aside from what these figures suggest about evangelism, they point up the inability of Presbyterians to hold on to their own covenant children. Even if Presbyterians had declined from 25 to 15 percent of the population, they would still have close to 45 million adherents, eight times as many as they claimed at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Of course, statistics are not always the best measure of success—though with more church members Presbyterians could form more institutions such as schools, publishing endeavors, and associations that might contribute to a heightened sense and more vigorous expression of Presbyterian identity. Other gauges of Presbyterian vitality are theological convictions and devotional practices. Here again the vital signs of Presbyterianism are not encouraging. For example, sufficient confusion about the doctrine of justification has prompted the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, an archconservative denomination by some standards, to appoint a study committee to clarify what was long recognized as the material principle of the Protestant Reformation. Furthermore, as John R. Muether has shown elsewhere, the Sabbath-keeping practices of American Presbyterians have declined considerably since the time when sanctifying the Lord's Day was a chief characteristic of Presbyterian devotion. Perhaps it is as much a function of decline as it is an explanation for it, but the fact that most conservative Presbyterians today identify themselves more readily as evangelical than Presbyterian is another indication of the relative weakness of contemporary American Presbyterianism.

The pivotal episodes covered in this series of articles help to explain the current predicament of American Presbyterianism. Presbyterianism in America can be divided into three eras. The first, which runs from the founding of the Presbytery of Philadelphia in 1706 to the formation of the first general assembly in 1789, was a period of organizational consolidation. In the colonial era, the basic rules governing the American church were established. The second era extends from 1789 to 1869, when the northern Old and New School churches reunited. It was a time characterized by expansion of the church outside the Northeast, the founding of educational institutions, and the development of Presbyterian self-awareness through doctrinal controversies and theological reflection. The final period of American Presbyterianism's first three centuries runs from 1869 to the present. Here the dominant theme has been ecumenism and social reform, with liberal and conservative Presbyterians coming down on different sides of those issues.

Each of these periods witnessed a major ecclesiastical controversy and subsequent split of the church. In the first era, the debates between the Old and New Sides concerned the qualifications for holding ministerial office, with questions about subscription, theological education, and religious experience giving shape to the debates. In the second period, the division between the Old and New Schools stemmed from disagreements about Calvinist theology and Presbyterian polity, and prompted both branches to embrace Presbyterian convictions more tenaciously than the colonial church had. In the recent period, the controversy between fundamentalists and modernists, or, less pejoratively, between conservatives and liberals, emerged from debates about the church's responsibility to society and the degree to which those duties required cooperation with other denominations and the relative threat of compromising distinctive Presbyterian convictions.

From one angle, the history of American Presbyterianism is a narrative of decline. In the eighteenth century, a struggling colonial denomination carved out a place for its ministry in a new society and eventually a new nation. By the early nineteenth century, this Presbyterian church had achieved sufficient stability and status to be one of the leading Protestant denominations in the United States, all the while preserving its Reformed heritage of theology, church polity, and worship. But with respectability and clout came the temptation to look for relevance or influence in spheres of American life that distracted Presbyterians from the teachings and practices that defined them as Reformed Christians. Consequently, by the early twentieth century the achievements of the previous two centuries had run aground on the ambitions of the American Protestant establishment. In this context, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church came into existence. Its purpose was, to a large degree, to preserve an older Presbyterian witness in the face of an American Protestantism that had confused cultural and political hopes with religious mission. As worthwhile as this division between conservative and liberal Presbyterians was, it did leave the OPC in relative obscurity, without a larger forum to articulate and clarify its beliefs, while the mainline denomination lost its ties to its Presbyterian past.

However, this narrative of decline is not the complete story. American Presbyterianism has always been marked by struggle, controversy, and hardship. There has never been a "golden age"—a time when the church was solid, faithful, and substantial. This is why we refer to the church during the time between the first and second advents of Christ as the "church militant." Indeed, the history of American Presbyterianism is an illustration of a profound stanza from the hymn "The Church's One Foundation":

'Mid toil and tribulation,
And tumult of her war,
She waits the consummation
Of peace forevermore;
Till with the vision glorious
Her longing eyes are blest,
And the great church victorious
Shall be the church at rest.

For three centuries, American Presbyterians have worked to commune and worship in a Presbyterian manner. In each generation, the labor has been difficult. And so it will be until the coming of the new heavens and the new earth.

We tend to look to the past for inspiration, for examples of courage and wisdom, for models of virtue and sacrifice. As valuable as that may be, it is equally important to recognize that the current age of redemptive history is one of exile and pilgrimage. If we identify a particular era as "golden," the temptation is to try to return to it, rather than to press ahead in the place where God has called us and hope for our arrival at our true and eternal place of residence. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it, "For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come" (13:14). If the history of American Presbyterianism teaches any single lesson, this one may be the most compelling: Our hope is not in the past, but in the world to come. This does not mean that remembering the past, both its accomplishments and its failings, is worthless. In fact, by so remembering our American Presbyterian heritage, Orthodox Presbyterians will be mindful, just as the great saints of Hebrews 11 were, of why we "desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (11:16).

Dr. Hart is the director of fellowship programs and scholar in residence at the Intercollegiate Studies Institute in Wilmington, Del.; Mr. Muether is the librarian at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Fla., and the historian of the

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