

## TURNING POINTS IN AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN HISTORY PART 12: 1973: THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

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The Presbyterian Church in America was born in 1973, but the rationale for its founding dated back more than a hundred years. The American Civil War provoked the division of Presbyterians along the Mason-Dixon line.

On December 4, 1861, commissioners from Southern presbyteries met in Augusta, Georgia, to renounce the jurisdiction of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (Old School) and to form the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America. (After the war, the church changed its name to the Presbyterian Church in the United States.) In its "Address to All the Churches of Jesus Christ throughout the Earth," the church outlined the Northern ecclesiastical indiscretions that forced its separation, especially the Gardiner Springs Resolutions of the previous General Assembly that declared the church's obligation to uphold the Union and support the federal constitution. In the minds of Southern Presbyterians, this was a violation of the spirituality of the church by an unwarranted engagement in partisan politics.

Northern and Southern Presbyterianism remained divided for well over a century. In the North, after the Old School-New School reunion, there was an eagerness to embrace the progressive spirit of the modern age, including Darwinism and biblical higher criticism. In contrast, Southern Presbyterians were anxious to preserve their heritage, which included biblical inerrancy, strict subscription to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, *jure divino* (divine right) Presbyterianism, and, most distinctively, the spiritual mission of the church.

Over time, a progressive spirit also took root in the South, and some ministers urged the church's liberation from the "dead hand of the past." In 1931, church historian Ernest Trice Thompson at Union Seminary in Virginia posed this question in the title of a *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* article: "Is the Northern Church Theologically Sound?" He gave the Northern church a clean bill of spiritual health and urged his Southern colleagues to pursue reunion. "Our sister denomination is fundamentally sound in the faith," he concluded, "and is just as likely to remain so as our own."

Assessments like this prompted concern among conservatives in the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) that modernism had infiltrated the South. Their fears were confirmed when efforts were launched (beginning in 1939) to follow the Northern church in softening the robust Calvinism of the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms. (Additional confessional revisions took place in 1942 and 1959.)

Further decline in the South was marked by the inroads of neo-orthodoxy—what Cornelius Van Til described as "the new modernism." Many Southern Presbyterian elders recalled the shock of returning home after service in World War II to a different church. By mid-century, it was a common lament that Dabney, Girardeau, Palmer, and Thornwell would not recognize what the PCUS had become.

Conservative opposition to neo-orthodoxy began to take organized form in 1942, when Nelson Bell, a longtime Southern Presbyterian medical missionary to China (and father-in-law of Billy Graham), launched a new magazine, the *Southern Presbyterian Journal*. It was a lay-oriented weekly magazine designed "to call our Southern Presbyterian Church back to her original position, a position unequivocally loyal to the Word of God and the Standards of our church which God has so signally blessed and which He will bless again." (Eventually the magazine would drop "Southern" from its name.)

Other conservative renewal groups formed, including Concerned Presbyterians, Presbyterian Churchmen United, and the Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship. The PEF, founded in 1964, sought to reestablish the doctrine of the spirituality of the church and to turn away from the social gospel in the conduct of foreign missions. Its agenda resembled that of the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions founded by J. Gresham Machen.

These groups met with a measure of success, especially in thwarting several plans to unite the Southern church with the modernists in the North. But merger seemed inevitable, especially after 1964, when the PCUS approved the ordination of women to ministry. Paul Settle described the sense of despair that had set in by the end of the decade: "Practically every

doctrine held precious by God's people had been denied, rejected, ridiculed, or at least called into question in the denomination's official publications, pronouncements, policies, and programs."

Southern Presbyterian conservatives, like their counterparts earlier in the century in the North, represented a mixture of doctrinal viewpoints that ranged from firmly committed Old School Presbyterians to fundamentalists who resisted social change. Moreover, there were divisions between those who sought reform from within and others who urged the need to separate. All parties seemed to agree, however, that a seminary was needed to provide ministers for the conservative cause, given their suspicions about the teaching at the four seminaries of the South (Austin, Columbia, Louisville, and Union). A key step in the promotion of the conservative cause was taken in 1966, when Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi, was established on explicitly Old School Presbyterian grounds, especially underscoring the spirituality of the church.

When yet another plan to unite the Northern and Southern mainline Presbyterian churches took shape in 1973, conservatives sensed the futility of mounting any further opposition. Instead, they focused their attention on withdrawing from a united church while maintaining legal possession of their church property. In the spring of that year, the drafters of the plan of union surprised both churches by announcing that they needed two more years to finish their work. Conservatives charged duplicity in the delay: the ultimate reason for the delay, they suspected, was to present a plan without the promised "escape clause" that would allow Southern congregations to leave the denomination with their property.

And so, practicing what Francis Schaeffer described as "discipline in reverse," Presbyterian conservatives, by this time united in a Continuing Church umbrella organization, mobilized quickly to organize a new church. Delegates from 260 churches gathered in Birmingham, Alabama, on December 4, 1973, to form the Presbyterian Church in America—122 years to the day after the founding of the old Southern Presbyterian Church. In its "Message to All Churches of Jesus Christ throughout the World," the new church announced that "we have called ourselves 'Continuing' Presbyterian because we seek to continue the faith of the founding fathers" of the PCUS.

The parallels between the founding of the OPC and the founding of the PCA are worth noting. Both stories involved controversies in foreign missions that led to the temporary establishment of parachurch mission agencies. Both saw a seminary formed exactly seven years before the birth of the church. Yet the continuing church movement in the South was different in significant ways from the covenant union in the North. The threat to the South, neo-orthodoxy, was more subtle than liberalism, and seemed less overtly hostile to confessional orthodoxy. Moreover, independent missionary work in the South proceeded without the threat of church discipline that confronted the members of the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions in the North. As a result, the Southern continuing church movement was able to develop slowly over several decades, and did not explode as quickly into a crisis. This permitted the formation of a constituency that was larger, if more theologically diverse.

The symmetry between the actions of 1861 and those of 1973 prompted some to accentuate the Old School identity of the PCA (citing, for example, the church's return to the 1861 version of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms). However, the PCA was a diverse body of conflicting theological agendas from its founding. Many of its founders were more eager to escape from the liberalism of the Southern church's bureaucracy and seminaries than to reestablish the high Calvinism of its Southern Presbyterian past. As Paul Settle observed, "The real unity of the church was remarkably unrealized in the PCA's early years."

Although it has struggled with theological controversies from theonomy to the charismatic gifts, the PCA has grown tenfold in thirty years. This was partly the result of the 1982 union with the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, and the voluntary realignment of some Orthodox Presbyterian congregations. What is less clear is the extent to which it is growing as a *Presbyterian* denomination. The distinct convictions of Southern Presbyterian orthodoxy have receded in most quarters of the church. The *Presbyterian Journal* evolved into *World* magazine, and "word and deed ministry" has begun to eclipse the "spirituality of the church" in the vocabulary of the PCA. These are signs that the denomination may be more eager to locate itself on the cutting edge of culture reformation than to foster a coherently Reformed and Presbyterian identity.

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