

TURNING POINTS IN AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN HISTORY

PART 8: CONFESSIONAL REVISION IN 1903

D. G. Hart and John R. Muether

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, industrial development and technological progress promised to usher in an age of unprecedented opportunity for America. Northern Presbyterians, recently reunited, were prepared to serve the spiritual needs of the nation with a spirit of self-confidence.

The greatest apostle of Presbyterian progress was Charles A. Briggs (1841-1913). As professor of Hebrew and cognate languages at Union Theological Seminary in New York, Briggs actively promoted higher-critical approaches to the Bible. He was also a leading advocate of Protestant church union. Both of these causes were in the interest of religious progress. "Progress in religion, in doctrine, and in life," he wrote, "is demanded of our age of the world more than any other age."

But there was an obstacle that prevented Presbyterians from fully embracing the spirit of the age, and that was their rigid commitment to a theology of the past. So Briggs also went around promoting revision to the Westminster Confession of Faith, especially in his 1889 book *Whither? A Theological Question for the Times*.

Briggs's argument was twofold. First, he claimed that the contemporary supporters of the Confession had actually distorted the spirit of its teaching. "Modern Presbyterianism," he charged, "had departed from the Westminster Standards" and a "false orthodoxy had obtruded itself" in its place. That false teaching—what he labeled "orthodoxism"—was coming from Princeton Seminary, principally in the defense of biblical authority championed by A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield. Briggs wrote:

Orthodoxism assumes to know the truth and is unwilling to learn; it is haughty and arrogant, assuming the divine prerogatives of infallibility and inerrancy; it hates the truth that is unfamiliar to it, and prosecutes it to the uttermost. But orthodoxy loves the truth. It is ever anxious to learn, for it knows how greatly the truth of God transcends human knowledge.... It is meek, lowly, and reverent. It is full of charity and love. It does not recognize an infallible pope; it does not bow to an infallible theologian.

Although critical of the alleged innovations from Princeton Seminary, Union Seminary's Old School rival, Briggs did not advocate merely removing a supposed Princetonian gloss from the Westminster Confession. Presbyterians, he argued, must also acknowledge the inadequacies and errors of the Confession. Since progress was of the essence of genuine Presbyterianism, the Confession itself encouraged its adjustment "to the higher knowledge of our times and the still higher knowledge that the coming period of progress in theology will give us." Failure to take this step would be to retreat to the errors of Rome and to abandon the very principles of the Reformation.

Briggs was tapping into a growing consensus in the church, which had begun to form no later than the reunion of 1869, that the harder Calvinistic edges of the Confession needed to be softened. In the words of Benjamin J. Lake, "Some of the time-honored rigidity in the Westminster Confession

seemed obsolete to many Presbyterians." Typically, Presbyterian rigidity was spelled p-r-e-d-e-s-t-i-n-a-t-i-o-n.

At the same time, former Old Schoolers feared the rise of "broad churchism" and anticonfessionalism. But if Briggs's proposals outraged conservatives, the spirit and the terms of the 1869 reunion discouraged efforts to discipline him. That reticence ended in 1891, however, when Briggs delivered an address on "The Authority of Holy Scripture." Given upon the occasion of his induction to the chair of biblical studies at Union, immediately after his solemn resubscribing to the Westminster standards, this lecture was a broadside against the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture taught in them. "I shall venture to affirm that, so far as I can see, there are errors in the Scriptures that no one has been able to explain away; and the theory that they are not in the original text is a sheer assumption."

Conservative reaction was swift. Sixty-three presbyteries presented overtures to the General Assembly, calling for action. The 1891 Assembly voted overwhelmingly (449 to 60) to veto Briggs's appointment at Union, and the 1893 Assembly found him guilty of heresy and suspended him from the ministry. Union's board of directors refused to accept the decision, and so it "divorced" itself from denominational oversight and retained Briggs on its faculty.

The Briggs trial prompted the defeat of a plan for confessional revision in 1893. Briggs himself eventually left for the Episcopal Church, but the push for revision continued. Thirty-four presbyteries sent overtures for revision to the 1900 Assembly, and that Assembly appointed a study committee of fifteen, which included a former U.S. President (Benjamin Harrison) and a sitting Supreme Court justice (John Harlan). One who was invited, but declined to serve, was Princeton's Benjamin B. Warfield. "It is an inexpressible grief," he wrote, to see the church "spending its energies in a vain attempt to lower its testimony to suit the ever changing sentiment of the world around it." Warfield's lament would persuade few. In an era when change was a sign of health, his dissent sounded, in the words of an opponent, as a call for the "harmony of standing still." Briggs may have left the church, but clearly his spirit lived on.

Despite some support for a major overhaul, a compromise prevailed that effected minor revisions to the Confession. In 1903 the church added two chapters on "The Holy Spirit" and "The Love of God and Missions." Both were crafted with language that was vaguely biblical and not distinctively Reformed. In addition, the church revised chapter 16, article 7, which described the works of the unregenerate. Where these works were formerly described as "sinful and cannot please God," the revised language described them as "praiseworthy." Perhaps of greatest significance was the inclusion of a "Declaratory Statement" that sought to explain the Confession's doctrine of election. In words that many accused of being deliberately ambiguous, the statement offered an "avowal ... of certain inferences" about predestination, softening the doctrine for those who found it offensive and contradictory to the doctrine of human freedom.

Presbyterians for the most part reacted enthusiastically to these changes. It was a preservation of "generic Calvinism" in the judgment of many. Henry Van Dyke carefully framed the results within the mainstream of Calvinist orthodoxy: "These two truths," he wrote, "God's *sovereignty* in the bestowal of his grace, and his *infinite love for all men*, are the hinges and turning points of all Christian theology. The *anti*-Calvinist decries the first. The *hyper*-Calvinist or Supralapsarian decries the second, holding that God creates some men on purpose to damn them, for his glory. The true

Calvinist believes both and insists that they are consistent." The *Philadelphia Public Ledger* echoed Van Dyke's sentiments. The revisions to the Confession left its basic Calvinism intact while managing "to render it instantly so much more congenial to the modern mind."

Years later, Princeton historian Lefferts Loetscher was more candid when he described alterations as a "change to Arminianism." By these revisions, he wrote, "the Remonstrants of the Synod of Dort ... finally won recognition" in American Presbyterianism. Evidence for Loetscher's interpretation can be found in the reunion that took place on the heels of revision, when the Arminian prodigals of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church reunited with the Northern Presbyterians in 1906. Two years later, Presbyterians were leaders in the formation of the Federal Council of Churches, the institution that would emerge as the voice for mainline or (as evangelicals called it) "liberal" Protestantism.

Confessional revision, then, opened the church to an ecumenical age. But that was not its only consequence. Equally significant was the effect it generated among conservatives, who began at this time to adopt new strategies for fighting the rise of liberalism in the Presbyterian Church. Beginning with the Portland Deliverance, which was adopted by the 1892 Assembly and affirmed the verbal inspiration of Scripture in opposition to the heresy of Briggs, resistance to modernism in the Presbyterian Church took the form of defending the "necessary and essential" elements of the church's teaching, especially the so-called fundamentals of the faith. In the Portland Deliverance and other declarations that followed in 1910, 1916, and 1923, conservative Presbyterians sought to italicize certain doctrines as the Bible's truly nonnegotiables, rather than the Confession itself as containing the system of doctrine found in the Scriptures. In one sense, then, the progressives were right: the Confession was becoming obsolete for many Presbyterians, and confessional identity was vanishing, not only quickly on the left, but also gradually on the right.

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 OPC; both are OP ruling elders and members of the Committee on Christian Education. Reprinted from New Horizons, August/September 2005. Used with permission.