

## **TURNING POINTS IN AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN HISTORY PART 7: THE REUNION OF 1869**

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These church officers were gathering to ratify the merger of the Old School and New School branches of the Presbyterian Church. The New School commissioners, who had been meeting at Third Presbyterian Church, marched single file toward First Presbyterian Church. Their Old School counterparts, who had been meeting at First Church, started marching at the same time toward Third Church. When the commissioners reached the same city block, according to George Hays, they "halted, and facing each other, met in the middle of the street, shook hands, and in double file, led by their Moderators arm in arm, proceeded to the Third Church for a mass meeting celebrating the event."

The reunion of 1869 was obviously an effort to heal the division of 1837-1838. But the reunion was not as simple as sending cheerful Presbyterian commissioners to Pittsburgh for a parade. Coming on the heels of the Civil War, this merger was closely bound up with the affairs of the nation. In fact, the 1869 reunion was the last of four Presbyterian reactions to the sectional crisis that divided the North and the South.

The first was the 1857 withdrawal of the New School's six southern synods to form the United Synod of the PCUSA. This separation stemmed from the growing tension between the anti-slavery sentiments within the New School and those presbyteries and synods located in slave-holding regions. Here it is important to remember that New England and New York supplied the intellectual muscle for both abolitionism and New School Presbyterianism. This made it almost inevitable that southern New Schoolers, for whom slavery was a way of life, would feel out of place among abolition-minded Presbyterians.

The second event that mirrored America's political crisis was the 1861 division within the Old School Presbyterian Church. At the General Assembly that convened shortly after the Confederacy's attack on Ft. Sumter, Gardiner Spring, a highly respected pastor from New York City, proposed a set of resolutions that called upon the church to affirm its loyalty to the federal government in Washington, D.C. Charles Hodge of Princeton Seminary faulted the so-called Spring Resolutions for introducing politics into the spiritual affairs of the church. Backing the Union, Hodge explained, was akin to singing the national anthem at the observance of the Lord's Supper. Despite objections like these, Spring's proposal prevailed, and in response the Southerners withdrew to form the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States (P.C.C.S.).

Three years later, the P.C.C.S. merged with the United Synod to form the Presbyterian Church in the U.S., also known as the Southern Presbyterian Church. This was the third event in the Presbyterian encounter with the Civil War.

Although the 1864 merger in the South resulted in a denomination that would last for almost 125 years, the 1869 reunion in the North, the fourth event in this sequence, generated greater fanfare and had a more profound influence on American Protestantism. In fact, the Northern reunion

illustrated that war has been the chief catalyst for ecumenical relations in America. For that reason, the deliberations that culminated in the northern reunion are worth exploring.

At the start of the Civil War, reunion in the North between the Old and New Schools was basically unthinkable. To the Old School, the New School's theology was still suspect. Influential New School pastors, such as Albert Barnes and Nathan Beman, were still active and had never disavowed their denials, at least implicitly, of the imputation of Adam's sin. To be sure, the New School had tempered some of its views and had severed ties in 1855 with the Congregationalist churches of New England. Still, Old School leaders like Charles Hodge and Samuel Baird insisted throughout the debates that even if defective teachings were no longer prominent, the New School's history of tolerating such erroneous teaching was a sufficient reason to reject reunion.

But folks like Hodge and Baird had fewer sympathetic listeners than they had in 1837. The split among Old Schoolers in 1861 over the Spring Resolutions was one factor; the Old School in the North lost some of its ablest theologians and churchmen. Also, after thirty years, a new generation of pastors and elders, who knew not the debates of the 1830s, was active in church proceedings. Also important was the Western element in the Old School, which had emphatically supported the Union during the war and which took at face value most, if not all, of the New School's assertions of its own orthodoxy.

Even if there were theological sticking points in the reunion discussions, Northern politics proved to be the proverbial grease that quieted the squeaky doctrinal wheel. "The jolt," as Lewis G. Vander Velde called it (*The Presbyterian Churches and the Federal Union*, 1932), that caused the bitterness of the 1830s to fade from memory was the Civil War. "For four years, while this struggle absorbed men's attention, religious and ecclesiastical bickerings could be, if not forgotten, at least relegated to a secondary place."

Starting in 1862, the Old and New School Assemblies exchanged fraternal delegates, and that began to thaw relations. Accompanying these exchanges was greater conformity on political issues. Both churches issued declarations pledging their loyalty to the federal government. Although the New School had long been on record in condemning slavery, the Old School began to catch up after President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Then, after the war, both churches arrived at similar views on Reconstruction, that is, on what to do with the "rebels," how to treat the freed slaves, and the terms for ecclesiastical fellowship with Southern Presbyterians.

As Vander Velde writes, "The Old School did not, it is true, emulate the New School Assembly in undertaking the role of coach to the Federal Government in the matter of political reconstruction," but both sides "expressed identical opinions ... though with differing degrees of violence of language." For example the editor of the *Christian Herald and Presbyterian Recorder* wrote in July 1865 that "the great duty of the hour" was "the vindication of the powers ordained by God and of His law by punishing traitors." For some reason, these same sentiments did not extend to the "rebels" of 1776.

In 1866, both General Assemblies appointed committees to study reunion and suggest suitable measures for executing it. The following year witnessed the greatest opposition to reunion at the Old School Assembly. Hodge was particularly adamant that the Old School church possessed distinct traditions that would be lost after the merger.

But in 1867 the Reformed Presbyterian Church sponsored a weeklong convention in Philadelphia that brought together leaders from most of the American Presbyterian denominations to seek more effective means of cooperation and fellowship. According to many, this gathering was pivotal in bringing important Old and New School officials together and in creating enthusiasm for the reunion of their churches.

When the plans for merger finally came to a vote of presbyteries in 1869, support for the venture was overwhelming. Of the Old School's 144 presbyteries, 126 favored the plan and only 3 voted against it (while 15 abstained). The New School's 113 presbyteries all cast their ballots for reunion.

The significance of these votes in 1869 would not emerge for several decades. Hodge would be vindicated in his prediction that merger would mean the loss of the Old School's distinct ways. Only Princeton Seminary would keep alive the Old School's outlook in the Northern Presbyterian Church.

Equally significant was the trend in interdenominational cooperation and ecumenical efforts that the 1869 reunion launched. Presbyterians in the reunited church established various organizations to nurture greater cooperation among all the Presbyterian and Reformed denominations. At the same time, these Presbyterians were at the forefront of endeavors to unite all American Protestants in a variety of interdenominational and ecumenical agencies. The logic behind these efforts was similar to that which led to the reunion of the Old and New School Presbyterians. The spiritual needs of the nation were so great—from materialism and secularism to Roman Catholicism—and the resources of Protestants were so scattered that closer cooperation and better organization was imperative.

The merger of 1869, then, marked the beginning of a new period in American Presbyterian history, characterized by cooperation and fellowship. The motto of the era was essentially, "Doctrine divides, mission unites." Just as the War for Independence had done, so the Civil War swayed Presbyterians to set aside some of their religious convictions for the seemingly greater good of preserving a Christian society.

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