

TURNING POINTS IN AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN HISTORY

PART 5: THE PLAN OF UNION, 1801

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In 1801, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. entered into a "Plan of Union" with New England Congregationalists that has long baffled Presbyterians concerned about the well-being of their communion. The purpose of the agreement was to strengthen Presbyterian home missions and prevent divisive competition between Presbyterians and Congregationalists.

The first of the four articles in the Plan reads as follows:

It is strictly enjoined on all their missionaries to the new settlements, to endeavour, by all proper means, to promote mutual forbearance, and a spirit of accommodation between those inhabitants of the new settlements who hold the Presbyterian, and those who hold the Congregational, form of Church government.

The rest of the Plan specified how congregations were to call ministers, relate to presbyteries or Congregationalist associations, and conduct discipline. It all sounded good, but within thirty years many Presbyterians would rue this agreement.

Reasons for cooperating with the descendants of New England Puritanism were not hard to find. The Presbyterian Church was facing a real shortage of ministers at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It would not found its first seminary, Princeton Theological Seminary, until 1812. At the time of the first General Assembly in 1789, the Presbyterian Church had 419 congregations, but only 111 ministers. By 1803, the number of congregations had grown to 511. The Plan of Union opened up New England's considerable resources, both for pastors and for schools, that could train more.

But the Plan also opened the Presbyterian Church to influences from New England. To be sure, New England Calvinism had remained basically sound during the eighteenth century. But it also possessed certain characteristics that invited theological novelty. Jonathan Edwards himself, although a vigorous defender of Calvinism, displayed a theological style that was quite different from the creedalism of the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians and that encouraged doctrinal experimentation.

For instance, Mark A. Noll writes that New England's theologians followed more closely in Edwards's "intellectual spirit" than did the Presbyterian theologians who would eventually teach at Princeton. Samuel Hopkins, one of those New England theologians, wrote that the Northampton pastor "took his religious principles from the Bible, and not from any human system or body of divinity." Hopkins added that although Edwards was Calvinistic, "he called no man father." Edwards "thought and judged for himself, and was truly very much an original." In contrast, Presbyterians treated theology as a "conserving effort." Princeton Seminary's original professors were "willing to say 'father' to a whole host of orthodox divines." (See Noll's essay in *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience*, edited by Nathan O. Hatch and Harry S. Stout.)

The implications of these different theological styles would become especially noticeable during the three decades after the Plan of Union was adopted. During this period, while Presbyterians were still

trying to coordinate and consolidate the structures of a national church, New England's Calvinism was in flux. Unitarianism began to assert itself as a viable option for ministers in Massachusetts. Arminianism was also making inroads within Congregationalist ranks. In response, New England Calvinists attempted to modify their theology in order to steer between hyper-Calvinism on the one side and the rationalism of Unitarianism on the other.

The most important modifier of Calvinism during the first half of the nineteenth century was Nathaniel W. Taylor (1786-1858), who taught at Yale Divinity School and became the father of the so-called New Haven Theology. Out of a concern for evangelism and revivals, he altered the idea of original sin. Taylor still believed that men and women were basically sinful. But to teach that they were born in sin, he argued, removed any hope for their coming to Christ and their moral renovation. Consequently, he understood sin to be strictly active and personal, rather than covenantal or hereditary. The key statement for him was, "Sin consists in the sinning."

Taylor's rejection of the classic Calvinist idea of original sin also involved a modification of the doctrine of the Atonement. These two revisions were connected by the rejection of imputation. If Adam's sin was not imputed to all of his posterity ("by ordinary generation"), then neither did Christ's righteousness need to be imputed to believers. Instead, Taylor opted for a moral or governmental theory of the Atonement. Christ did not take the sins of the church upon himself at the cross; rather, his death showed how greatly God detested violations of his law. In this view, the cross becomes a symbol of the consequences of sin, but not the payment for it.

Through the Plan of Union, Taylor's views gained entry into the Presbyterian Church. The New Haven Theology also became popular (and possibly attractive to some Presbyterians) through the revivals of Charles G. Finney, who basically adopted Taylor's theology for his program of mass evangelism.

Taylor's influence in Presbyterian circles was most evident in the preaching of Albert Barnes (1798-1870). This Presbyterian pastor hailed from western New York, the region through which New Englanders traveled as they moved west. He trained at Princeton Seminary before taking his first call in Morristown, New Jersey. In 1829, he delivered his most famous sermon, "The Way of Salvation," which showed that the New Haven Theology had found a home in the Presbyterian Church. In this sermon, Barnes denied the doctrine of original sin much as Taylor did. He declared that the Bible did not say

that the sinner is held to be personally answerable for the transgressions of Adam, or of any other man; or that God has given a law which man has no power to obey. Such a charge, and such a requirement, would be most clearly unjust. The law requiring love to God, supreme and unqualified, and love to man, is supposed to be equitable; fully within the reach of every mortal, if there was first a willing mind.

Although no charges were brought against Barnes for teaching doctrines contrary to the Westminster standards, the situation changed dramatically when he moved to Philadelphia in 1830 to become pastor of that city's First Church. New England views had trespassed upon old Scotch-Irish turf.

The Presbytery of Philadelphia in 1831 condemned the ideas contained in Barnes's sermon, "The Way of Salvation." He appealed the ruling to the General Assembly in ways remarkably similar to the spirit of New England's theologians. Barnes claimed that his sermon reflected an honest investigation of the Bible, "to look at that book as a source of independent information." He added that he never

examined Scripture according to "what particular opinions have been held or denied by any class of men." If this made his views heretical, then he was as much a heretic at the time of his appeal as when he first wrote the sermon. Barnes clearly stood in that theological trajectory that "called no man father," even if his subscribing to the Westminster standards might have implied otherwise.

The controversy over Barnes was largely responsible for the formation of a party of Presbyterian conservatives who would eventually start the Old School Presbyterian Church. These churchmen were concerned about the increasing disparity between New England Calvinism and the teachings of the Presbyterian Church. Opposition to Barnes was the initial outlet for this concern. But it also percolated up to the level of the General Assembly and resulted in several contentious meetings between 1834 and 1838. Barnes himself would never be formally condemned by the Assembly. But if the Presbyterian Church had rejected his teaching as contrary to the Westminster standards, it might have escaped the division that was looming on the horizon. As it happened, Barnes made inevitable a referendum on the Presbyterian Church's relationship to New England's Congregationalist churches.

Ironically, then, the plan for cooperation between Presbyterians and Congregationalists ended in antagonism and ultimately in division (see the next article in this series). The Presbyterians who approved the Plan of Union were swept up in the patriotism of the Revolution's aftermath and the expansion of the new nation, and assumed that their Congregationalist counterparts were reliable partners in establishing new churches in the new states and territories. After all, Presbyterians and Congregationalists had been the two denominations that overwhelmingly supported independence from England. But the political bonds that drew them together were insufficient to cover important theological differences. When Presbyterians of a later generation declared that doctrine divides but ministry unites, they were clearly forgetting the Plan of Union and its aftermath.

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