

TURNING POINTS IN AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN HISTORY

PART 6: OLD SCHOOL PRESBYTERIANISM, 1838

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At the General Assembly in 1837, the Old School party of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. pushed through a motion that abrogated the 1801 Plan of Union (see [part 5](#) of this series) and declared the Western Reserve region of the Presbyterian Church to be "no longer a part" of the denomination. This area included presbyteries and synods in New York State and the upper Midwest (primarily Ohio). Twenty-eight presbyteries, 509 ministers, and 60,000 church members were removed from the church.

But the Old School believed that the crisis in their communion required such drastic measures. In 1834, during preparations for that year's General Assembly, the leaders of the Old School party circulated a petition, the "Western Memorial," that set forth the Old School's concerns and gained the signatures of eighteen ministers and ninety-nine elders. The Memorial listed eight items that addressed the abnormalities and errors that were present in the church, thanks to the cooperative venture with the New England Congregationalists. In sum, Old School Presbyterians believed that the Plan of Union had compromised the polity and theology of their church. After several years of failing to receive an adequate response from the General Assembly, Old Schoolers found themselves to be in the majority at the 1837 Assembly. They took matters into their own hands and terminated their awkward cooperation with the Congregationalists.

For the revocation of the Plan of Union to go into effect, the next General Assembly would have to approve it, and that necessity brought out the less seemly side of the usually dignified Presbyterians. The gathering in 1838 was scheduled to be held at Seventh Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, the unofficial capital of American Presbyterianism. Political intrigue characterized both parties as they laid plans for the Assembly.

When Old School Presbyterians heard of the New School's scheming to prevent the ratification of the 1837 decision, they arrived at Seventh Church ahead of the appointed time to convene and took all the seats at the front of the church, so they could control the proceedings. Their plan was a partial success, and it was assisted by the fact that the previous year's moderator was an Old School Presbyterian. When the New School commissioners arrived and tried to participate in the Assembly, the moderator refused to recognize them. One presbyter from western New York asked the moderator for the privilege of being enrolled. But the moderator responded with the polite but stern assertion, "We do not know you, sir."

The 1838 General Assembly quickly fell apart. Seeing that they had no standing at the Assembly, the New School commissioners convened their own General Assembly at the back of the church. But the strain of holding two deliberative meetings in one building proved to be too much for these antagonistic Presbyterians. Eventually the New School commissioners withdrew to meet at nearby First Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. The New Schoolers called themselves the "Constitutional Assembly," while the Old Schoolers called themselves the "Reforming Assembly." Despite the New School's effort to claim the constitutional high ground, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, which heard a complaint from the New School members, declared that the revocation of the Plan of Union and

the subsequent excluding of New School commissioners was "certainly constitutional and strictly just."

Today the term *Old School Presbyterian* has a variety of meanings, but at the time of the division of 1837 it reflected the effort of American Presbyterians to resist being absorbed into the general mainstream of generic American Protestantism. Contemporary Presbyterians may think that being Old School involves certain views on creation, Scripture, sabbatarianism, or worship, but during the middle decades of the nineteenth century, as the Western Memorial indicated, it stood for Presbyterianism that was self-conscious about Calvinism and Presbyterian church polity. In fact, Old School Presbyterianism was opposed to New School Presbyterian views and impulses as much as it was committed to definite views of soteriology and ecclesiology.

In his first book, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience* (1970), George Marsden identified three themes that characterized the New School, and which the Old School rejected as being at odds with Presbyterian faith and practice. The first was a nationalistic outlook that blended a concern for society with the promotion of revivals. New School Presbyterians, as part of the New England Puritan tradition, believed that the health of America depended upon its spiritual well-being. Second, these Presbyterians favored the use of voluntary associations—tract and Bible societies, nondenominational missions agencies, organizations to promote moral reforms such as temperance and the abolition of slavery—to spread the benefits of Christian civilization. Finally, the New School modified Calvinist theology by developing doctrines that would support both revivals and moral reform. This theology was associated with such New School Presbyterians as Albert Barnes and Lyman Beecher. It took the jagged edges off Calvinism's depiction of human depravity, so that people might be more inclined to choose Christ and try to lead holy lives by some of their own power, rather than having to wait for divine initiative.

Although diversity existed within the ranks of Old School Presbyterians, the threat of the New School elicited thoughtful and forthright insistence upon historic Presbyterian convictions. In addition to defending the importance of human sinfulness, divine sovereignty, and justification for understanding salvation aright, the Old School developed a high view of the church that distinguished the ministry's purposes from those of national well-being. In other words, the task of the church was not explicitly to reform society. Christianity, Old Schoolers admitted, might well benefit the nation. But the church's chief aim was the salvation and edification of God's people, no matter what their nationality.

Attention to the mission of the church also involved careful reflection on the authority and order of church assemblies and institutions. Several Old School theologians developed a highly learned doctrine of the church that conceived of Presbyterian polity as the divine pattern for Christ's rule in his body, not merely as a wise or practical way of ordering the church. Some of the better-known Old School Presbyterian theologians, many of whom are still read today, are Charles Hodge (1797-1878), who taught at Princeton Seminary, James Henley Thornwell (1812-1862), who taught at Columbia Theological Seminary in South Carolina, and Robert Lewis Dabney (1820-1898), who taught at seminaries in Virginia and Texas. Lesser known, but equally gifted, theologians were such Old Schoolers as Stuart Robinson (1814-1881), who taught and pastored in Kentucky, Thomas Peck (1822-1893), who taught at Union Seminary in Richmond, and Samuel Miller (1769-1850), who taught at Princeton Seminary. This list shows the importance of regionalism, with the Old School

prospering in Pennsylvania, parts of New Jersey, and the South, in contrast to the New School, which drew its strength from New York and New England.

The temptation for conservative Presbyterians today is to identify the Old School with the golden age of American Presbyterianism. For this reason, a measure of caution is in order when evaluating the Old School. It was by no means a monolithic communion, nor was Old School Presbyterianism immune from certain problems that affected many Protestant denominations during the nineteenth century—particularly a reliance upon human reason in theological reflection, which sometimes ignored the importance of the Holy Spirit in apprehending divine truth.

Even so, the Old School Presbyterian Church was a rare moment in American Presbyterian history, when the desire to let the church be the church overrode competing distractions involving political and social affairs. After a period of infancy and meager resources, American Presbyterianism came into its own in the form of the Old School church. Ironically, despite the threat that the separation of church and state in America posed to the church's witness and spiritual authority, the Old School demonstrated that without either the crutch or the impediment of state sponsorship and support, Presbyterianism could mature into a vigorously confessional and churchly expression of Christianity.

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