

The Presbyterian Controversy in America (1869-1936)

I. Context (Late 19th Century)

A. Reunion of 1869

1. Rejoining of Old School & New School
2. Unite through efficient coordination, not doctrinally
3. Goal: Business-like/Progressive efficiency

B. Expansion

1. Church Growth, e.g., Sheldon Jackson
 - a. “Apostle Paul of the West”
 - b. Presbyterian church planting across the West
 - c. Pioneer work in Alaska
2. Bureaucratic growth [cf. discussion in text]

C. New Trends

1. Ecumenical emphasis
 - a. Cooperation w/ Evangelical and Presbyterian Alliances (text, 170-75)
 - b. Comity agreements on mission field
2. Confessional revision
 - a. Modified Westminster Confession (1903) in Arminian fashion (text, 184)
 - b. Accommodated a merger w/ Cumberland Presbyterians (1906)
3. Reform efforts, e.g., Prohibition
 - a. Raising moral level of nation
 - b. Last crusade to unite conservatives & liberals

D. Emphasis on Evangelism

1. Era of citywide efforts (D. L. Moody)
2. J. Wilbur Chapman
 - a. Perfected “simultaneous evangelism”
 - b. Secretary of special committee on evangelism for PCUSA
 - c. Became known for campaigns with Charles Alexander
3. Billy Sunday
 - a. The Sunday Image
 - 1) Triumph of rural values over urban—conqueror of the cities comes from the country
 - 2) Horatio Alger story—rags to riches
 - 3) Like Lincoln, a hero of Midwestern values and wisdom: “Hero of the Heartland”
 - 4) Often tied Americanism & Prohibition to the gospel
 - b. Methodology: tabernacles
 - c. Height in 1910s: New York campaign (1917)
4. Purposes
 - a. Evangelism of the lost—primary
 - b. Uniting Presbyterians/Christians
 - c. *Efficient* evangelism
 - d. Social control (cities, immigrants)
 - e. Social reform
 - f. Attract men to the church

II. Onset of the Controversy

A. Rise of Liberalism

1. Rooted in the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the philosophy of Kant
2. Became a factor in USA after Civil War
3. Often called “Modernism,” because it sought to bring theology into “modern world” and make it appeal to “modern man”
4. Influences
 - a. Hegel—inevitable progress
 - b. Darwin—evolution of simple to complex
5. Began in colleges, went to seminaries, thence to pulpits, thence to pews
6. Question: “Openness” of the New School
 - a. Allowed entrance of liberalism?
 - b. Yet many New School fought liberalism
7. **Main Issue: Confessional Church vs. “Broadening Church”** (Loetscher)

B. Orthodox Response

1. Princeton Theology: Confessional Presbyterianism systematized
 - a. Position of Princeton
 - 1) Went from “middle of the road” to staunchly Old School
 - 2) Presbyterian Church’s leading school
 - b. Princeton theologians
 - 1) Archibald Alexander—founder
 - 2) Charles Hodge
 - a) Leading systematizer in his 3-volume *Systematic Theology*
 - b) Fought German criticism & Darwinism
 - 3) B. B. Warfield
 - a) Leading polemicist
 - b) Best known in defense of inerrancy
 - c. Evaluation
 - 1) Weakness: Underestimated noetic effect of sin
 - 2) Staunch in its defense and *explanation*—not *invention*—of inerrancy
 - 3) The leading *scholarly* response to liberalism
2. Dispensationalism
 - a. Many Presbyterian conservatives of era were dispensationalist
 - b. Formulated by Plymouth Brethren in early 19th century with a surprisingly widespread influence
 - c. Theological significance
 - 1) Not traditionally Reformed → Discontinuity of Israel and the church
 - 2) Very strong on orthodox doctrine
 - 3) Example of how the “broadening church” concept was an openness to new ideas, not simply an openness to liberalism
 - d. Presbyterian Adherents
 - 1) James Brookes: Major figure in spreading dispensationalism, led Niagara Bible Conference
 - 2) Presbyterian evangelists (Chapman, Sunday)
 - 3) Lewis Sperry Chafer of Dallas Theological Seminary
 - e. Dispensationalists made up significant portion of Presbyterian militants

3. Tightening Church Discipline
 - a. Portland Deliverance (1892)
 - 1) Inerrancy as the teaching of the church
 - 2) Belief required for ordination
 - b. Fivefold ordination test (1910; reaffirmed 1916 and 1923)
 - 1) All candidates had to affirm inerrancy, the virgin birth, vicarious atonement, the resurrection, & miracles
 - 2) Not *all* of the fundamentals, but shibboleths being denied by liberalism
 - 3) Leads to myth of “five fundamentals” of Fundamentalism—really a response to liberal attack than a statement of all essentials
4. Heresy Trials
 - a. Not “witch hunts” but due process in a legal manner
 - b. Against professors: Charles Augustus Briggs (convicted over inerrancy), H. P. Smith, & A. C. McGiffert
 - c. Against pastors: David Swing of Chicago
 - d. Trials required preparation, courage, & persistence—and a willingness to endure bad publicity

III. The Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy

A. Background

1. Denominational battles (1920s-30s)
 - a. Presbyterian & Baptists in the North the biggest
 - b. Control of mission boards, publishing houses, schools
 - c. Resistance to ecumenical movement (Philadelphia Plan of Union of 1920)
2. Contrasting Approaches of the Parties
 - a. Orthodoxy vs. tolerance
 - b. Exclusivism vs. Inclusivism
3. “Fundamentalism”
 - a. From *The Fundamentals* (1910-15) & Baptist editor Curtis Lee Lawes
 - b. Defined
 - 1) Doctrinally: Belief in doctrines essential to Christianity
 - 2) Historically: Beliefs held by those called “Fundamentalists”
 - c. Term not always embraced by Presbyterians

B. Battles in the Presbyterian Controversy

1. Controversy over Harry Emerson Fosdick
 - a. Fosdick a liberal Baptist in a Presbyterian church—preaches “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” (1922)
 - b. Clarence Macartney
 - 1) Preaches “Shall Unbelief Win?”
 - 2) Launches overture to oust Fosdick
 - c. Fosdick asked to become Presbyterian (and be subject to discipline) or leave a Presbyterian pulpit
 - d. Tolerance defeated—on a technicality
2. Auburn Affirmation (1923)
 - a. Group of liberals and tolerant conservatives ask General Assembly to repeal the fivefold doctrinal test as unconstitutional
 - b. Argument: 5-fold test did not originate in presbyteries

- c. In 1927 the General Assembly agreed and allowed liberty on these issues
- d. Tolerance proclaimed
- 3. Princeton Seminary Controversy
 - a. Board reorganized (1929) to include all views found in Presbyterian Church
 - b. Machen & conservatives leave to form Westminster Theological Seminary
 - c. Tolerance mandated
- 4. Missions Controversy
 - a. Conservatives led by Machen protest liberalism among Presbyterian missionaries (e.g., Pearl Buck in China)
 - b. Machen forms Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions (1933)
 - c. Machen tried for violating church discipline and defrocked (1935)
 - d. Machen founds Orthodox Presbyterian Church (1936)
 - e. Tolerance toward conservatives denied
- C. Differing Conservative Approaches
 - 1. Maintain Cultural Influence
 - a. William Jennings Bryan: Maintain “Christian civilization”
 - 1) Bryan the Christian
 - a) Conversion in a revival as a young man
 - b) As with Lincoln, scriptural imagery pervaded his speech and writing
 - c) Lived a consistent Christian testimony
 - d) Saw Bible as basis for civilization
 - e) Affirmed “natural goodness of man” → trust in common man
 - 2) Affirmed Christian activism
 - a) Favored “big government” over “big business
 - b) Pressed for majority rule & majority will
 - c) Near pacifism (e.g., World War I) and opposed imperialism
 - d) Lost a race for vice-moderator of PCUSA in 1923
 - 3) Anti-evolution Crusade & Scopes Trial
 - a) Not just “defending Genesis”
 - b) An expression of his Populism (majority rule)
 - c) Feared effects of Darwinism: Morality & virtue rely on religion, and evolution undercuts them
 - b. Clarence Macartney: Believed cultural visibility important to witness
 - 1) Politically activist, rejecting Southern Presbyterian “spirituality of the church” and supporting prohibition
 - 2) Unwilling to give up on the Presbyterian Church
 - a) Confessional integrity important but followed a “Puritan” approach
 - b) Believed that a majority could be roused for conservative cause
 - c. Billy Sunday
 - 1) Mild Presbyterianism dedicated to cultural impact through evangelism
 - 2) Stressed fundamental doctrines, but little on Presbyterian distinctives
 - 3) Emphasis on rallying Christians in general more than any interest in a denominational perspective
 - 2. Dispensationalist Option
 - a. Lewis Sperry Chafer: Dispensational theology more important than Reformed theology

- b. Example: Merrill T. MacPherson
 - 1) Vice president of IBPFM; suspended along with Machen
 - 2) Formed Church of the Open Door of Philadelphia, and joined the Independent Fundamental Churches of America
 - 3) More “typically” Fundamentalist → a break from a mainline denomination to associate with an interdenominational premillennial fellowship
 - 4) Key point is dispensationalist system, not Presbyterian identity
- c. Without Presbyterian affiliation, Presbyterian dispensationalists drifted to other moorings
- 3. Confessional Integrity: J. Gresham Machen
 - a. Confessional, not Fundamentalist
 - b. Hesitant about term “Fundamentalist” and later rejected it
 - c. Preferred full Westminster orthodoxy over stress on certain “fundamentals”
 - d. Separatist: Formed purely Presbyterian Orthodox Presbyterian Church
- D. Concluding Thoughts on the Controversy
 - 1. Presbyterian “Fundamentalism” a coalition united only by opposition to liberalism
 - 2. Presbyterian discipline a determining factor—whether for orthodoxy or for tolerance
 - 3. Nature of Presbyterian separatism
 - a. Some perhaps rooted in Dispensationalist theology
 - b. Macartney a “default separation” of attitude, not breaking connections
 - c. Machen & OPC rooted in confessional theology