

# Southern Presbyterianism

## I. From the Civil War to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

### A. Nature

1. PCUS: Old School in orientation
2. Conservative: Required 3/4 vote of presbyteries for constitutional changes
3. Very missions oriented
4. Maintained “spirituality of the Church”
5. Moved from defending slavery to defending South

### B. Southern Presbyterian Theology

1. Initially very conservative/Old School
2. Main Schools: Union Seminary, Virginia; Columbia Seminary, SC
3. Leading theologians
  - a. James Henley Thornwell: “spirituality of the church”
  - b. Robert Lewis Dabney
    - 1) On staff of Stonewall Jackson
    - 2) Unreconstructed southerner
    - 3) Helped found Austin Seminary, Texas
  - c. John Girardeau: wrote on church order and organization
  - d. Benjamin Morgan Palmer: opposed evolution

### C. Theological Battles

1. Battle in 1880s over James Woodrow of Columbia Seminary for theistic evolution—he was eventually ousted
2. No Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy: As in the SBC, there *were* liberals but numbers were small and they weren’t as radical
3. Dispensationalism controversy
  - a. Committee investigated Dispensationalism’s impact on PCUS (1940s)
  - b. Key figure: Lewis Sperry Chafer
    - 1) Southern Presbyterian & founder of Dallas Theological Seminary
    - 2) Theologian of the Fundamentalist movement
    - 3) Spread Fundamentalism in South—but usually in interdenominational form
    - 4) Often felt tension with Reformed theology
  - c. Committee censured Dispensationalism
    - 1) Ruled Dispensationalism & Westminster standards irreconcilable
    - 2) To confessionalists, Dispensationalism was not Westminster orthodoxy
    - 3) Chafer ironically sided w/ liberals on subscription

## II. Changes After World War II

### A. Shifts

1. In the Culture
  - a. Formation of “New South”
  - b. Civil rights movement and desegregation
  - c. Influx of northerners to region
2. In the Church
  - a. Race
    - 1) Segregated presbyteries a heated issue
    - 2) Troublesome association of conservatism w/ segregation

- b. Women: First woman minister ordained in 1965
      - c. Developed more centralized bureaucracy
      - d. As with PCUSA, leadership pressed ahead of grass roots
    - 3. Symbol: Case of Ernest Trice Thompson
      - a. Church historian at Union Seminary: described 20<sup>th</sup> century in PCUS as “Out of the Backwaters” and “Into the Mainstream”
      - b. Pushed for reunion of PCUS w/ northern Presbyterians
      - c. Accused of departing from Westminster standards
      - d. Acquitted by presbytery & General Assembly
  - B. Continuing Church Movement
    - 1. Founded after Thompson acquittal
    - 2. Sought to propagate “old” Southern Presbyterian Church
    - 3. Among leaders: L. Nelson Bell, who opposed leaving the denomination
    - 4. Led to founding Reformed Theological Seminary in Mississippi in 1960s
    - 5. Eventually became core of many who left to form the PCA
  - C. PCUS merged w/ UPCUSA in 1983
- III. Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)
- A. History
    - 1. Formed in 1973
    - 2. Initially concentrated in Deep South (Mississippi, Alabama, & SC)
    - 3. Mainly departure from PCUS (originally)
      - a. Originally took name “National Presbyterian Church” but changed in 1974
      - b. Part of a “conscience clause” the PCUS adopted as a means of furthering union talks with UPCUSA—congregations could leave within a stated period
    - 4. Merged with Reformed Presbyterian Church—Evangelical Synod in 1982
      - a. The RPCES was merger of a Bible Presbyterian split (Evangelical Presbyterian Church) and an old covenanter group (RPC—General Synod)
      - b. Gave PCA its only “official” schools: Covenant College on Lookout Mountain and Covenant Seminary in St. Louis
    - 5. Merger talks failed w/ OPC
    - 6. “Unofficial” schools: Reformed Theological Seminary, Greenville Presbyterian Seminary
  - B. Character
    - 1. Basically conservative, much more so than PCUSA
      - a. Often said to represent the Machen/Princeton/classic Southern Presbyterian theology
      - b. Tension: “hardliner” confessionalists vs. “evangelical” broader conservatives
    - 2. Has moved out of South (although still dominantly southern)
    - 3. “Separatist” in a sense
  - C. Controversies
    - 1. Charges of Charismatic influence but teaching officially condemned
    - 2. Covenant College—choir participation in Catholic Mass
    - 3. Tension over Theonomy (Christian Reconstruction)
    - 4. Six-day creation—ruled an “open” question
    - 5. Subscription: ruled 2003 for subscription w/ written scruples for objections
  - D. Analysis: Clearly conservative but uniformly confessional?