

# A Brief History of American Presbyterianism

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## From the Beginnings to the First General Assembly (1683-1789):

**Francis Makemie and William Tennent:** The minister often regarded as the founder of Presbyterianism in America was an Irish missionary name Francis Makemie (1658-1708). In a fairly short period of time was able to team up with three other ministers and churches to form the first presbytery in Philadelphia (1706). This new presbytery quickly spread, making it necessary to form a synod of three presbyteries (1716). The 1729 synod meeting approved the *Adoption Act*, which required all Presbyterian ministers to subscribe to the Westminster Standards. *Based on our lesson last week, why do you think the Adoption Act was an important step for the new church?* Around this same time, a Presbyterian ministry named William Tennent (1673-1745) established a theological training ground that originally met in a log cabin, affectionately known as *The Log College*. The school later became known as the College of New Jersey, and then \_\_\_\_\_. *Why do you think it was necessary to form a seminary in the Colonies?*

**Old Side/New Side:** From about 1725 until roughly 1760, the American Colonies experienced a sustained period of religious awakenings known as the first *Great Awakening*. The revival was largely advanced by the efforts of itinerant preachers, like Gilbert Tennent, Jonathan Edwards, and George Whitefield. This revival created a division within the Presbyterian Church known as the *Old Side/New Side* debate. The New Side was pro-revival, Calvinistic, and wasn't shy about inter-denominational partnerships. The Old Side was anti-revival, not because they were against the spread of the Gospel, but because they feared the disordering effects of itinerant ministry. It was the French, Indian War of 1757 that ended the Old Side/New Side debate. *Why do you think itinerant preaching concerned Old Siders?*

**John Witherspoon** was a Scottish Presbyterian who immigrated to the colonies in 1768 to serve as the president of the College of New Jersey. He became a significant figure in the spheres of both church and government. Most notably in terms of politics, Witherspoon is known as the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence. Also, his considerable influence over one of his students (James Madison) led to a United States Constitution being undergirded with the same philosophies of polity that the Presbyterian Church was built upon. *What elements of the Presbyterian form of government do you see in our National government?* In terms of the church, Witherspoon led the efforts of the Presbyterian Church to draft and adopt the first Book of Church Order (1788). This document brought greater formality to the polity of the church and also restructured the church from one very large synod into 16 presbyteries, 3 synods, and one general assembly (1789). *What do you think prompted the need for greater order in the Presbyterian Church by the late 1700's?*

## Theological War Ended by Civil War

**Old School/New School:** Partly because of growing tensions resulting from a shaky *Plan of Union* (1801) with Congregationalists and partly due to the second Great Awakening (1787-1840), a new division arose in the Presbyterian Church: the *Old School/New School* debate. The main promoter of the New School side, Charles Finney (1792-1875), believed that revivals were the result of following a proper set of steps rather than the miraculous outpouring of the Holy Spirit. He and other New Schoolers also redefined certain theological ideas in ways that did not adhere to the WCF. They supported inter-denominational cooperation for revival and various social reforms (e.g. abolition). The Old School had its strongest base in the South. In 1837, the Old School gained control of General Assembly and successfully repealed the 1801 Plan of Union, *retroactively*. This effectively removed four entire synods from the church and sixty thousand communicant members from the rolls. The New School's response? Start a new denomination: The Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA).

**Civil War:** When the Civil War broke out, many Old School and New School leaders in the North demanded loyalty to the Union as an act of faithfulness to God. This put Old and New School ministers in the South in an awkward position. Paul says in Romans 13:1, "*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities...*", but which one were they supposed to be loyal to? Presbyterians in the South responded by reuniting its Old and New School adherents in 1861, forming the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America (post-war, renamed the Presbyterian Church in the United States). Following the war, Presbyterians in the North followed the South's example by reuniting their New and Old School elements by 1869. Soon after, the northern PCUSA reached out to the southern PCUS

seeking to reunite the nation's two Presbyterian denominations. The PCUS' general assembly rejected this for reasons best captured in Robert Dabney's address to the General Assembly, which will be read aloud: *According to Dabney's address, what was the main motivation of the Southern PCUS to remain separate from the Northern PCUSA? Do you think this was valid? What may have been some other important issues?*

## The Rise of Liberalism and the Birth of Two Denominations

**Princeton Theology vs. Liberal Theology in the PCUSA:** Modernism greatly influenced many theologians, who in turn began to rethink their commitments to many of the supernatural claims that form the fundamental basis of the Christian faith (i.e. Christ's deity and bodily resurrection). This theological trend is known as *liberal theology*. Other theologians who insisted upon fundamental truths, especially Princeton educators like, Charles Hodge (1797-1878), A. A. Hodge (1839-1869), and B. B. Warfield (1851-1921), were known as *fundamentalists* and are the fathers of "Princeton Theology", which is not a reference to the theology of Princeton University as it stands today, but as it stood then.

**Machen and the OPC:** But soon the tide changed. In 1924, a proclamation called the *Auburn Affirmation* was drafted in New York by 150 PCUSA clergymen and signed by 1,270 at the 1924 GA. It sought to liberalize the church on issues including, 1.) The virgin birth, 2.) The inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, 3.) Miracles, 4.) The necessity of Christ's blood for our atonement, and 5.) The bodily resurrection of Christ. One conservative Princeton professor, J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937) took aim at this with the following statement in the *New York Times*, "...the declaration as a whole is a deplorable attempt to obscure the issue. The plain fact is that two mutually exclusive religions are being proclaimed in the pulpits of the Presbyterian Church... One is the great redemptive religion known as Christianity—a religion founded upon certain supernatural events in the first century; the other is naturalistic or agnostic modernism, anti-Christian to the core."<sup>1</sup> *Do you think the Auburn Affirmation posed any real threat to the PCUSA? If so, what?* Machen was ousted from the PCUSA in 1936 and consequently lost his post at Princeton. He and others who, for conscience sake, could no longer stay in the PCUSA began Westminster Theological Seminary and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (1936).

**Liberalism in the PCUS and the birth of the PCA:** Meanwhile in the South, liberal theology spread in tandem in the PCUS and there were ongoing efforts between the PCUS and the PCUSA to merge. For many years conservative southern Presbyterians fought against the growing trend. But when reform from within became impossible, and it became more and more likely that the PCUS and already strongly liberal PCUSA were going to merge, a withdrawal became necessary. This withdrawal finally took place in December, 1973 at the first General Assembly of the National Presbyterian Church (later renamed the Presbyterian Church in America). In the months leading up to the withdrawal, Francis Schaefer addressed a group rallied by the steering committee, "When it is no longer possible to practice discipline in the church courts, then you must practice discipline in reverse and leave. But your leaving must be with tears, not with flags flying and bands playing."<sup>2</sup> As with the OPC, the founders of the PCA did not see withdrawal as the start of something new, but as a continuation of a church that had ceased to exist in the PCUS. *What do you think Schaefer meant by "When it is no longer possible to practice discipline in the church courts..."? Do you think the founders of the PCA were justified in starting a new denomination? Why or why not?*

**Joining and Receiving:** Since the OPC and the PCA have much in common in terms of doctrine, polity, and practice, there have been several attempts at unifying the two denominations, each of which failed. However, in 1982, the Reformed Presbyterian Church Evangelical Synod (RPCES) and the PCA agreed to a Joining and Receiving of the RPCES into the PCA. *Why do you suppose it is called "joining and receiving" rather than "negotiated merger"? Given the history of the OPC and the PCA, why do you suppose all attempts to unite the two have failed?*

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<sup>1</sup> "Modern Agnostic, Says Dr. Machen," *New York Times*, 10 January 1924, 4. quoted in Sean Michael Lucas. *On Being Presbyterian: Our Beliefs, Practices, and Stories* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Pub., 2006), 212.

<sup>2</sup> Kennedy Smartt, *I Am Reminded* (Chestnut Mountain, Ga.: n.p., n.d.), 22. quoted in Lucas. *On Being Presbyterian*, 239.