

The Battle for the Gospel

Introduction

- **Acknowledgement:** Our lessons in this class summarize material drawn from D.G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking a Better Country: 300 Years of American Presbyterianism*. Quotes are from the same.
- **Definition:** Presbyterianism is a branch of Protestantism that embraces biblical Reformation not just for our theology of *salvation*, but also for our theology of *worship* and our theology of *church government*.
- **Goal:** By understanding the story of our branch of the Christian family, we will be better equipped to learn from the past, to understand the emphases and tensions of the present, and to live faithfully in the future.

Review: The Presbyterian Civil War

- From 1801–1837, Presbyterians worked with Congregationalists to plant churches on the frontier.
- Through this “Plan of Union,” some dangerous “New England Theology” began infecting the Presbyterian Church. This theology denied the biblical doctrines of original sin and substitutionary atonement.
- Conflict over this theology split the Presbyterian Church into “Old School” and “New School” in 1838.
- With the onset of the Civil War, both of these bodies split again between Northerners and Southerners.
- In 1864, the Southern “Old School” and “New School” reunited as the Presbyterian Church (CSA) – which changed its name after the War to the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS).
- In 1869, the Northern “Old School” and “New School” reunited as the Presbyterian Church (USA).
- At the turn of the 20th century, Presbyterians remained divided: PCUSA (North) and PCUS (South).

In terms of emphasis, where did these denominations generally stand at the outset of the 20th century?

- The PCUS (South) generally developed along “Old School” lines, emphasizing theological precision.
- The PCUSA (North) generally developed along “New School” lines, emphasizing cultural transformation.

How did the end of the Civil War affect the outlook and spirit of the PCUSA?

- Overall, the end of the War created great enthusiasm and optimism among northern Presbyterians:
 - From 1869–79, Rev. Sheldon Jackson established almost 100 churches on the western frontier.
 - By 1884, Jackson had begun planting churches and schools as far away as the Alaska territory!
- In general, pre-war disputes over doctrine gave way to a new mission to “preserve Christian civilization in America.” Besides the long-standing perceived dangers of Sabbath-breaking and intemperance, there was a new threat on the horizon: large numbers of Roman Catholic immigrants.

Note: this was the era in which the pope was issuing statements against democracy and religious liberty, the era in which the First Vatican Council (1869–70) declared papal infallibility.

- Perceiving these threats, “Presbyterians began to set aside theological differences over soteriology [the truths about how we are saved], the sacraments, and church order, and they rallied to the nation-state as an area of common endeavor and sure means of preserving Protestant hegemony,” (172).

While the PCUSA focused on changing culture, what movements were changing theology?

- In 1859, Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*, followed in 1871 by *The Descent of Man*. Darwin did not invent evolutionary theory, but his work brought the ideas to the general public.
- In 1883, a German scholar named Julius Wellhausen published *Prologue to the History of Israel*, which argued that the Pentateuch was not written by Moses, but rather was composed from various sources as Israelite religion evolved from animism to polytheism to henotheism to monotheism. Wellhausen did not invent the “documentary hypothesis,” but he cast it into evolutionary form and popularized it.
- In 1891, Charles A. Briggs (a Presbyterian professor in NYC) publicly affirmed the existence of errors in the Bible. In 1893, the General Assembly convicted Briggs of heresy and suspended him.

Why is this period called the “Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy”? What is the “Social Gospel”?

- Modernism says: Bible teachings need to be changed as historical progress gives us “higher knowledge”
- In 1892, conservatives led the PCUSA General Assembly to adopt the “Portland Deliverance” – a statement affirming that there were “Five Fundamentals” – non-negotiable doctrines of Christianity:
 - 1) The inerrancy of the Bible,
 - 2) The virgin birth of Jesus Christ,
 - 3) The substitutionary atonement,
 - 4) The literal resurrection of Jesus, *and*
 - 5) The reality of Jesus’ miracles.
- “Social Gospel” – any approach to gospel ministry where the conversion of sinners is pursued for the sake of the improvement/preservation of society. Though usually associated with Modernist/liberal theology, Social Gospel thinking also existed/exists in Fundamental/conservative circles.

How did this controversy escalate in the following years?

- 1903–1905 – the world is amazed as Wright Brothers pioneer heavier-than-air flight
- 1917–1918 – Presbyterian President Woodrow Wilson leads the USA to enter World War I, in order to “make the world safe for democracy.”
- 1919 – Harry Emerson Fosdick, a Baptist pastor serving at First Presbyterian in NYC, published an article claiming that “America’s returning soldiers would not accept the traditions of yesterday’s Christianity. The church especially owed it to those who fought on America’s behalf to offer a message that accommodated itself to the spirit of the age,” (189).
- 1922 – Fosdick preached “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” calling for tolerance of all perspectives
- 1923 – New York Presbytery ordained two men who could not affirm the virgin birth of Christ
 - Conservatives protests cannot overturn, yet the Assembly reaffirmed the Five Fundamentals
 - Liberals produced the “Auburn Affirmation,” a document claiming that the Five Fundamentals were mere ‘theories’ about the Bible’s message. Within a year, almost 1300 pastors signed it!

Who was J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937)?

- Born in Baltimore, Machen enjoyed a privileged upbringing. He attended Johns Hopkins University then Princeton Seminary. Importantly, he also studied theology for a year in Germany – where he experienced some real spiritual struggle as he studied theological Liberalism/Modernism from its leading proponents.
- Taught New Testament at Princeton Seminary from 1906–1929, and having come through his struggle became a leading, thoughtful scholarly opponent of Modernism. Ordained in the PCUSA in 1914.
- In 1923, Machen published *Christianity and Liberalism*. This very readable book was essentially a plea for intellectual honesty. With firsthand knowledge, Machen graciously argued that Modernism is really a separate religion, and ought to separate itself accordingly rather than try to subvert historic Christianity.

How did Machen’s activities lead to the ‘endgame’ of the controversy and the founding of the OPC?

- In 1926–27, the General Assembly adopted a stance that repudiated Machen’s thesis and instead blamed Princeton Seminary for division in the church. It ordered Princeton Seminary to be reorganized.
- In 1929, when Princeton reorganized, Machen left and established Westminster Theological Seminary.
- In 1932, two members of the PCUSA Foreign Missions Board collaborate in the publication of a study entitled *Re-Thinking Missions*, which called the Christian church to abandon its exclusive “religion of fear.”
- In 1933, Machen and his allies established an Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions.
- In 1934, the General Assembly ordered all ministers to resign from the Independent Board – or else!
- In 1935, Machen’s presbytery convicted him and suspended him from the ministry.
- In 1936, after Machen’s appeal failed, he and his allies organized the Presbyterian Church of America.
- In 1937, New Year’s Day, Machen died in Bismarck, ND – while trying to rally support for the church.
- In 1939, after being sued by the PCUSA, our name changed to the “Orthodox Presbyterian Church.”