

Reformed Theological Seminary

JONATHAN DICKINSON AND THE STRUGGLE FOR A HEALTHY  
PRESBYTERIANISM:  
THE PURITY AND UNITY OF THE CHURCH

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## **ABSTRACT**

The research question of this project is, “what is at the root of the Presbyterian’s historical struggle to enjoy the purity and unity of the church, as each elder has vowed to promote, and are there concrete steps that can be taken to address the problem.” There is an assumption native to the question, which is that Presbyterians in America have long struggled with the purity and unity of their church.

To gain a meaningful understanding of the struggle, this project highlights the life and ministry of Jonathan Dickinson (1688-1747), arguing that he was the most important Presbyterian leader during the most formative years of American Presbyterianism. Dickinson is known to history as a moderate reformer, but there is more to him. His example of Presbyterianism that balanced New Side sensitivities with Old Side convictions in an era of competing ideas can add value to the modern church’s pursuit of its purity and unity.

However, many years have passed since Dickinson’s colonial era. Therefore, a sweeping evaluation of the primary challenges to the church’s health over its first three centuries, culminating in the development of the PCA, is included. Finally, a model of leadership training is proposed as a way of fleshing out the ordination vow to promote the purity and unity of the church, drawn from the pastoral lessons of Dickinson and the key Presbyterian controversies that followed him. If implemented, the model can aid the PCA in its pursuit of purity and unity.

## CHAPTER ONE

Jonathan Dickinson (1688-1747) has a reputation. While he was the most important Presbyterian in the formative years of colonial Presbyterianism, for most historians he is an obscure pastor worthy of little attention. His headstone in Elizabeth, New Jersey, offers a parable for his legacy: it's hard to find and has suffered from generations of neglect. Even for Presbyterians he is often overlooked. When he is remembered, Dickinson is almost uniformly characterized as a moderate reformer easily cast to the shadows of American Presbyterianism. This reputation has been assigned almost exclusively because of his stance in the 1720s on the matter of confessional subscription. Whereas contemporary confessional debates center on Good-faith vs. Strict subscription, in Dickinson's day the dispute was more stark: no subscription vs. full subscription. In those debates Dickinson was opposed to any subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith, or any other confessional standard.

But he was also the key broker in the deal that led to a version of subscription whereby all Presbyterian ministers and candidates were required to subscribe to the Confession but allowed to state their scruples. Because the Adopting Act of 1729 was considered a compromise, most view its chief architect, Jonathan Dickinson, as willing to compromise his own convictions, choosing to lay them aside for the sake of unity. By all accounts, Dickinson was an agreeable man and earned the respect of all sides he engaged in the debates. Far too often, however, those same accounts portray him as so averse to

conflict as to lay aside his convictions to forge a brand of unity mostly devoid of doctrinal steel.

A careful re-examination of his ministry reveals a fuller picture. While he was committed to healthy compromise where he saw fit, he was not willing to sacrifice the purity of the church for the sake of its unity. This is where a recovery of Dickinson's life and ministry can represent a helpful guidepost for the contemporary Presbyterian Church in America. Too often, either the purity or the unity of the church is sacrificed for the sake of the other, even if unwittingly, despite the vows every elder takes to promote both.

This project recovers Jonathan Dickinson's version of New Side Presbyterianism to show that he can be a substantial assistance to the contemporary PCA, particularly because each minister takes a vow to promote the purity and unity of the church, often with little success outside of one's own ministerial networks. My own interest in Dickinson was piqued when I was involved with a network of PCA ministers organizing to help steer the denomination in ways we believed were needed because of perceived doctrinal laxity. However, I was simultaneously uneasy with a developing ethos that seemed out of place for a minister having vowed to promote both the purity and unity of the church. I sensed far too much "us verses them" in our dialogue and knew instinctively that "the other side" had something valuable to say. This sent me to the pages of church history, particularly to the days of colonial Presbyterianism, for an example of churchmanship that could meet the need. This is when I was reintroduced to Jonathan Dickinson and why I believe he needs to be recovered for the health of the PCA.

The PCA is transitioning from its founding generation to its second, much the way Dickinson ministered as the colonial church transitioned from its infancy to adolescence. Things that may have once been assumed are now up for debate in the PCA, as happens during generational transition. Like their colonial forefathers, contemporary PCA ministers labor in a time of massive cultural shifting and competing presuppositions. There is value in gaining clarity on how the early American Presbyterians dealt with the discord of their day and forged a denomination able to be passed down. Like previous eras, there are different schools of thought in the PCA, each with different values that lead to different priorities for the churches. Must the PCA make the choice between confessional purity or church unity? The key to a faithful Presbyterian witness in the rising generation will be a true and meaningful pursuit of both the purity and unity of the church. A tour through Dickinson's life and ministry, and the sort of Presbyterianism he forged, can serve as a faithful guide.

However, Jonathan Dickinson is not an end. Three centuries have passed since his ministry gave character to early Presbyterianism in the United States. Chapter two, then, shows the historical connections between older Presbyterian conflicts and the contemporary PCA. In today's conservative PCA, multiple parties may be discernable. That has been the case since Presbyterianism first came to exist in this country. The divisions they faced in previous generations are not dissimilar to our own. Chapter one traces three key issues because, as I argue, they each gave shape to the founding of the PCA. Beginning with party differences connected to confessional and evangelical integrity, particularly as the Great Awakening approached, the first section retreats into the agitations of the 1720s and 1730s. In the New Side / Old Side division we can get a

glimpse of how those debates among America's earliest Presbyterians helped shape the character of all future American Presbyterians. Second, the issues concerning the nature and mission of the church distressed the Presbyterian communion in the middle of the nineteenth century and, like the Great Awakening a century before, drove the church into formal division. That New School / Old School division remains a contest within the PCA as the church tends to prioritize either doctrine for the sake of church purity or unity for the sake of mission, but seldom achieves both. The third issue that shaped the founding of the PCA had to do with broadening doctrine in the southern Presbyterian church after the 1870 reunion. The latitudinarianism stemmed largely from the faculty at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia and its most gifted graduates. The broadening of the church centered on the doctrine of the Scripture, particularly as Higher Criticism gained influence in the Presbyterian Church, United States (PCUS). As the conservatives within the southern church awakened after World War II, the opportunities to contend for the inerrancy of the Word were rapidly declining. These are the three issues, one in each of the church's first three centuries, that most directly shaped the character of the PCA's founding. Exploring them can help the current PCA understand its place in the broader Presbyterian story.

Chapter three is devoted to an overview of Jonathan Dickinson's life and ministry as a way of setting the platform for a fuller understanding of his context. How he went about the purity and unity of the church in an age of unsettled Presbyterian identity amid changing cultural values is a help to the modern church. After an overview of the influences that shaped his life, this chapter explores the platforms through which Dickinson's convictions, developed in the most mature decades of his ministry, are best

analyzed. First, his commitment to proper limits within the church is studied, with special attention on the 1720s and the subscription debates. Here is where the Adopting Act will be considered. Though he is most often remembered as an opponent to subscription, he approved a form of adoption and even later (1735) reversed his opinion.

Second, Dickinson is examined from the standpoint of his debates over order within the church, with particular attention on his role as a New Side proponent in the Great Awakening while simultaneously honoring the convictions of the Old Side. Here, too, his opinion changed after the arrival of George Whitfield in Elizabethtown and the fires of revival came to his home church. This chapter shows how Dickinson viewed himself as a caretaker of the church, which allowed him to be fair-minded and, in turn, granted him influence to strengthen the church.

Chapter four returns the reader to the biblical mandate connected to both the purity and unity of the church through exegetical analyses of five key biblical texts.

John 17:1-5 and the Eschatological Context for the Purity and Unity of the Church. This section concludes that the *Hour*, the *Glory*, and the *Divine Authority* of Jesus set the eschatological context for His prayer for the redemption and unity of His people.

John 17:13-21 and the Teleological Context for the Purity and Unity of the Church. This section notes that the invisible church's sanctification in the truth represents the end goal for Jesus' prayer in John 17.

John 17:21-24 and the Trinitarian Context for the Purity and Unity of the Church shows that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, being one in kind, character and image

represents the intra-trinitarian oneness as the basis for Jesus' prayer for the oneness of His church.

Ephesians 4:1-16 and the Ecclesiastical Context for the Purity and Unity of the Church argues that the totality of the spiritual realities from the Ephesian creedal formula provides a framework for relational unity within the church and the connection of purity to unity.

Psalm 133 and the Hebraic Context for the Purity and Unity of the Church. This examination reveals that while Psalm 133 is aspirational in nature, it ties the people of God together in a kind of unity that is already enjoyed in the truest, spiritual sense but is not yet experienced in the fullest way.

Chapter five dives into modern scholarship dealing with the purity and unity of the church by identifying the cultural influences that affect them, first from different values within the PCA, and then from changing values of the world. A noticeable trend is discernable within contemporary scholarship about church purity and unity when set against the cultural backdrop.

Virtually every contemporary writer addresses the purity and unity of the church from one of three perspectives: 1) An Aspirational approach argues that the church should unite because there are bigger things at stake than there are things that divide us. This approach urges the modern church to keep perspective on differences because the primary attribute of the church is its unity. 2) A Missional approach argues that we should unite because without unity, the Christian church loses its voice in culture and thus compromises its mission. 3) An Historical-Theological approach wonders aloud if the church's divisions are really a bad thing at all. This approach argues that church

purity is the surest way forward toward church unity. While each of these makes a valuable contribution to the subject of the church's purity and unity, the latter represents the best approach with the most likely success.

Chapter six takes the reader back to the rocky years of the 1730s and zeroes in on Dickinson's pursuit of the purity and unity of the church through the lens of two case studies. These two case studies are vital to understand Dickinson from an historical perspective, but also from an ecclesiastical perspective insofar as they show how his resolve to achieve the purity and unity of church was a painful, but valuable exercise. First, his conflict with the Anglicans over polity related matters reveals his commitment to contend for the purity of the Presbyterian church against the threat of corruption from the outside. Second, his role in the Samuel Hemphill affair, which was American Presbyterianism's first heresy trial, and subsequent pamphlet war with Benjamin Franklin, show his resolve to preserve the purity of the church against both the threat of schism from within and from cultural pressures threatening to undo the Presbyterian witness.

Finally, chapter seven proposes a two-module leadership seminar for the Surfside Presbyterian Church (PCA) leadership teams, though the seminar is meant to be transferable to other contexts. First, a guided tour through the foundational years of American Presbyterianism. Special focus is on the life and ministry of Jonathan Dickinson because he sets a healthy example of navigating competing ideas in a rapidly changing world and diverse opinions of what it means to be a Presbyterian. The key moments in colonial Presbyterianism are introduced by way of what I call Turning Points, which are then answered in a way that helps the reader see how those moments

have shaped our own. This is designed for local church leaders to help orient themselves around the idea that they have inherited generations of faithful Presbyterianism, despite a legacy of important conflicts. Second, a modest applied theology for the purity and unity of the church is proposed under three headings, drawn from the lessons of chapter one, each of which includes a biblical, theological, and historical perspective.

This project makes no assumptions of solving the riddle. The Presbyterian Church in America will never attain to the full measure of purity and unity until the Lord returns in glory. Perhaps the Lord might use this modest study to advance our obligation to pursue the health of the church in its purity and unity for the sake of cheerful confessionalism and a faithful witness in a changing world.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS: AN OVERVIEW OF THE CONFLICTS THAT INFLUENCED THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA’S STRUGGLE TO ACHIEVE THE PURITY AND UNITY OF THE CHURCH.**

The history of Presbyterianism in the United States has been marked by the struggle for both the purity and unity of the church, which has in turn led to a proliferation of opinions on how to resolve the tension and why it still exists. In 2006, for instance, the theologically liberal Presbyterian Church, United States of America (PCUSA) completed a multi-year study on the peace, purity and unity of the church. The task force made seven recommendations for adoption at its 217<sup>th</sup> General Assembly and concluded with these words,

The task force is convinced that the world is watching the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and other denominations as we engage in highly publicized debates. To be one is not to say that we will be the same, that we will all agree, that there will be no conflict, but as the church listens to Jesus pray, all its members are reminded that the quality of our life together—our ability to make visible the unique relationship that is ours in Jesus Christ—is compelling testimony to the truth and power of the gospel we proclaim.<sup>1</sup>

The Presbyterian Church in America is one of those, “other denominations” that the world is watching as we engage in highly publicized debates. In 2023 the PCA

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<sup>1</sup> *Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church* (Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2006), 45. [https://www.pcusa.org/site\\_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/peace-unity-purity-final-report-revised-english.pdf](https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/peace-unity-purity-final-report-revised-english.pdf).

celebrated its fiftieth anniversary.<sup>2</sup> It was an anniversary marked by celebration and joy, but it was also greeted by a deeply divided denomination. The previous two years' annual General Assemblies revealed a sharp division in the philosophies and worldviews of the PCA's ministers, especially as the denomination confronted particularly challenging issues in both the culture and the church.

A few examples tell the story of contemporary divisions. A 2021 Overture, called Overture 14, sought clarity on the role of women on the mission field, with special attention on the biblical mandate for male-headship in ecclesiastical matters. It was a question of ecclesiology, but it was also raised against the backdrop of a changing application of complementarianism<sup>3</sup>. To what degree does our constitution encourage or restrict the ministry of women where there is a gap in male leadership on the field? The overture proposed a change to the Mission to the World bylaws restricting line authority to male leaders because the scriptures do not permit female leaders in church ministry.<sup>4</sup> Those opposed to the change argued complementarianism does not restrict women from filling such leadership roles "in country" because any woman in leadership would be

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<sup>2</sup> For a testimony on the movements of people and decisions that led to the formation of the PCA, see Sean Michael Lucas, *For a Continuing Church: The Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> The late Rachel Held Evans drew significant attention to the modern implications of complementarianism with the publication of her article, "Will The Real Complementarian Please Stand Up." See, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/real-complementarian>, accessed November 30, 2022. This article, in turn, spawned a lengthy conversation within the conservative PCA, and beyond, with respect to women's place in church leadership and mission. From this conversation came the Nashville Statement in 2017, signed by over twenty-four thousand people, which further advanced the biblical notion of complementarianism, but also prompted evangelical dialogue over differing opinions concerning women's ministries on the mission field. For the Nashville Statement, see <https://cbmw.org/nashville-statement/#articles>, accessed November 30, 2022. Specific to the PCA, this proposed change was in response to the denomination's Strategic Plan initiative that promoted women toward greater engagement in the life of the church.

<sup>4</sup> The original overture may be found at <https://pcaga.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Overture-14-Evangel-MTW-Manual.pdf>. I served on the committee through which this overture came to the floor for debate. I spoke extensively to the issue, which underwent slight revisions.

under the leadership of an elder, “up the line.” The resulting vote was 961-814 in favor of the proposed change; almost a perfect 50-50 split.

That same year, two highly controversial overtures arose for debate, Overtures 23 and 37, dealing with ministerial qualifications and ordination standards, with special attention on human sexuality. To what degree does the scripture or our constitution allow or disallow men who self-describe as desiring sexual deviance, though celibate, to serve in ordained leadership. The Assembly passed Overture 23 by a large margin and 37 by a much narrower margin.<sup>5</sup> The debate was highly charged as the denomination tried to understand its biblical foundations in the age of changing sexual ethics and identities. However, the Presbyteries failed to ratify the decision on both Overtures by a very thin margin.<sup>6</sup> What many thought would be a simple statement of sexual fidelity revealed vastly different convictions that were missional in nature. The sides took to the internet to make their case, even as subsequent years produced additional attempts at restrictions and clarity on the matter of so-called Side B gay Christianity.<sup>7</sup>

Stepping just a bit further into recent history, the 2010 PCA General Assembly faced sharp division over the adoption of an updated Strategic Plan, which was initially approved for implementation in 2006.<sup>8</sup> The 2010 Strategic Plan contained proposals that

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<sup>5</sup> Overture 23 passed 1438-417 (77%). Overture 37 passed 1113-692 (62%). For records and review of the process, see <https://byfaithonline.com/general-assembly-updates-for-july-1/>, accessed March 27, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> See Scott Edburg, “The End of Overtures 23 & 37,” *The Aquila Report* (blog), February 11, 2022. <https://theaquilareport.com/the-end-of-overtures-23-37/>. Overture 23 received 57% of presbytery votes. Overture 37 received 56%. Each required 67% for ratification. Accessed March 27, 2023.

<sup>7</sup> The 50<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the PCA presented four additional overtures for debate touching on the issue of sexuality and identity. See <https://pcaga.org/2023-overtures/>, accessed May 8, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> The 2010 Strategic Plan and its proposals for adoption at the 38<sup>th</sup> General Assembly may be found at [https://www.pcahistory.org/pca/ga/38th\\_pcaga\\_2010.pdf](https://www.pcahistory.org/pca/ga/38th_pcaga_2010.pdf), accessed February 10, 2023.

revealed serious divisions in the denomination, with almost every proposal passing by a slim 60-40 vote along old school / new school party lines.<sup>9</sup>

The recent history of the PCA has been marked by divisions and crises.<sup>10</sup> Without exception, those divisions and crises have centered on the question of the purity and unity of the church, virtually always stemming from disputes over limits of doctrinal confessionalism or the mission of the church.

Maintaining the unity of the church together with its purity has been an elusive goal from the time of the earliest American Presbyterians to the present, despite the vows nearly every member of nearly every denomination or communion has taken. In the tradition of the Presbyterian Church in America, each member vows, “To study the purity and peace of the church.”<sup>11</sup> Further, each ordained minister and lay officer in the PCA vows to, “be zealous and faithful in maintaining the truths of the gospel and the purity and peace and unity of the church.”<sup>12</sup>

Practically speaking, there’s an historical reason to require each minister in the PCA to take such vows.<sup>13</sup> To trace the history and roots of the PCA is to trace the crises over its purity, which has always affected its unity. Though the PCA was formally founded in 1973, its roots run far deeper in the pages of church history. From its

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<sup>9</sup> I served on the General Assembly committee through which the 2010 Strategic Plan came to the floor for debate on its recommendations. Our committee debated the recommendations well into the third day of the Assembly.

<sup>10</sup> In 2021, to continue striving together for the purity and unity of the church, the General Assembly of the PCA hosted a panel discussion called, “Seeking Unity in the PCA” that covered the topic of disunity surrounding the denomination’s idea of confessional subscription. See *Seeking Unity in the PCA*, Gifts and Graces, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> The Presbyterian Church in America, *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America*, (Lawrenceville, GA: The Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, Year), 57-5.

<sup>12</sup> The Presbyterian Church in America, *BCO*, 21-5.

<sup>13</sup> On the history of oaths and vows in Presbyterian ordination, see Donald Macleod, “Ordination Vows,” *Donald Macleod*, March 8, 2011, accessed February 10, 2023, <https://donaldmacleod.org.uk/dm/ordination-vows/>.

beginning, the PCA has self-identified as a “continuing church,”

We have called ourselves “Continuing” Presbyterians because we seek to continue the faith of the founding fathers of that Church. Deviations in doctrine and practice from historic Presbyterian positions as evident in the Presbyterian Church in the United States, result from accepting other sources of authority, and from making them coordinate or superior to the divine Word. A diluted theology, a gospel tending towards humanism, an unbiblical view of marriage and divorce, the ordination of women, financing of abortion on socio-economic grounds, and numerous other non-Biblical positions are all traceable to a different view of Scripture from that we hold and that which was held by the Southern Presbyterian forefathers.<sup>14</sup>

The PCA founding documents identify several aberrant doctrines and priorities as cause for its own existence: various sources of authority, diluted theology generally, humanism, views on human relationships, declining opinions on ordination, social sins and other non-biblical positions that differed from the historic view of Southern Presbyterianism. The PCA wanted to be a self-conscious continuation of its southern Presbyterian roots. Sean Michael Lucas begins his lengthy history of the continuing nature of the PCA,

The creation of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) on 4 December 1973 was an attempt to preserve a “continuing” Presbyterian church. Concerned by the apparent leftward drift of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), colloquially known as the “southern Presbyterian Church,” those who led in forming the PCA were concerned with doctrinal and ecclesiastical issues, they believed that the agencies and boards of the denomination, along with many of its ministers, had become apostate and that the only way in which the mission and tradition of the PCUS could be preserved was through a separation. When the separation happened, it brought to an end over forty years of conflict with the PCUS.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> “Message to All Churches (1973),” accessed February 10, 2023, <https://www.pcahistory.org/documents/message.html>. “The Message to All Churches” noted the primary challenge to the future of the PCUS was a lack of theological purity, noting the issue twice in the opening paragraphs. To preserve the purity of the church, the founders of the PCA believed separation was the price.

<sup>15</sup> Sean Michael Lucas, *For a Continuing Church: The Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), 1.

Therefore, tracing the southern Presbyterian roots is vital to understand the PCA's pursuit of purity and unity and why the struggle for purity and unity in the PCA continues. It has been a long, hard fight. John E. Richards likened the origins of the PCA to the experience of natural childbirth, noting especially the long pains that led at last to the joy,

There was a conception, then a period during which the church grew in the womb of the old Mother Church, then there was the labor during which with great pains and travail, the church issued forth into the world. Then there was the joy of the newborn denomination.<sup>16</sup>

Presbyterianism in the United States has virtually always been a fighting group, almost certainly because Presbyterians have virtually always felt the intellectual and religious ground beneath them shaking.<sup>17</sup> The roots of PCA discord go back centuries, well beyond its southern tradition. In 2006, Western Reformed Seminary celebrated the three hundredth anniversary of the first presbytery in America with a three-part series on the forces that shaped the modern Presbyterian body. They noted that each century since the founding had one key crisis that carried forward to the present. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century it was the Adopting Act and subsequent Great Awakening.<sup>18</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was the Plan of Union and the Old/New School division.<sup>19</sup> In the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was the crisis of

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<sup>16</sup> John Edwards Richards, *The Historical Birth of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Liberty Hill, SC: The Liberty Press, 1987), xii.

<sup>17</sup> Lucas, *For a Continuing Church*, 5-9. Lucas traces the social and political pressures on the church that created a sense of need to return the PCUS to its roots of confessional Presbyterianism.

<sup>18</sup> John T. K. Dyck, "Presbyterianism in America: The Eighteenth Century," *WRS Journal* 13, no. 2 (August 2006): 9–16.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher K. Lensch, "Presbyterianism in America: The Nineteenth Century: The Formative Years," *WRS Journal* 13, no. 2 (August 2006): 16–25.

the Word of God and its reliability.<sup>20</sup> Benjamin Swinburnson makes a nearly identical observation that the lines of demarcation in American Presbyterianism can be traced through the divisions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century crisis of confessional integrity, the 19<sup>th</sup> century crisis of the mission of the church and 20<sup>th</sup> century crisis of the reliability of the bible. Those may be underscored as the New Side / Old Side conflict, the New School / Old School conflict, and the Fundamentalist / Modernist conflict.<sup>21</sup>

The aim of this chapter is to provide a synopsis of those earlier American Presbyterian crises because they give shape to the contours and context specific to the PCA's formation. This chapter, then, introduces the historical challenges Presbyterians have had in their pursuit of the purity and unity of the church by connecting the most important controversies, and the events that led to them, in American Presbyterian history as a way of shaping the formation of the PCA in 1973. Those historical conflicts are the battle for confessional and evangelical integrity, the debates over the nature and mission of the church, and the question of the bible's inerrancy and reliability.

### **Connecting the Influence of the Great Awakening to the PCAs Pursuit of Purity and Unity: Confessional and Evangelical Integrity**

In 1741 the Presbyterians split into the New Side and the Old Side over concerns of the purity of the church.<sup>22</sup> The Great Awakening had swept through the middle colonies, especially from 1739-1741, causing a division in the Presbyterian communion. The Great Awakening is almost universally appraised as a very positive movement of the Holy Spirit that spiritually awakened a generation. Still, fissures were revealed because

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<sup>20</sup> John A. Battle, "Presbyterianism in America: The 20th Century," *WRS Journal* 13, no. 2 (August 2006): 26–43.

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin Swinburnson, "Conquest or Compromise? John Thomson and the Presbyterian Adopting Act of 1729," *Journal of Northwest Theological Seminary* 26, no. 2 (2011): 34–57.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Augustus Briggs, *American Presbyterianism: Its Origin and Early History* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1885), 261–73.

the Old Side was suspicious of the “New Fangled Religion,” while the New Side was angered over the Old Side propensity to act “as a caterpillar” devouring new life and every green thing.<sup>23</sup> The New Side prioritized experiential religion. The Old Side wanted assurances of orthodox Presbyterianism. However, the division had started much earlier, in the rocky decade of the 1720s.

In that decade, Jonathan Dickinson rose to prominence as a moderate reformer and early advocate for the purity and unity of the church.<sup>24</sup> His churchmanship secured a unified synod around the thorny question of confessional subscription in 1729, but not all were satisfied or even agreeable to the meaning of the Adopting Act.<sup>25</sup> Luder Whitlock, Jr. notes,

Requiring subscription to the Westminster confession of faith on the one hand - yet allowing ministers and candidates for ordination to explain their exceptions to their Presbyteries and reserving to the Presbyteries the right of judgment regarding the acceptability of these exceptions - certainly allowed greater flexibility, but there was also considerable ambiguity. For example, the Synod did not define “the essential and necessary” points of doctrine. Years later Charles Hodge observed that “great obscurity in many minds still overhangs the subject,” adding that the fault was more in what was left unsaid than what was said. Ashbel Green, wholeheartedly in favor of strict subscription, was not happy with the Adopting Act because as he

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<sup>23</sup> For a robust description of these terms, how they affected the two sides and the nature of their debates, see Thomas H. L. Cornman, *Caterpillars and Newfangled Religion: The Struggle for the Soul of Colonial American Presbyterianism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc, 2003). Cornman helpfully frames the division as having been conditioned by various ethnic Presbyterians in the colonies. For Cornman, the schism was over four primary conflicts, each stemming from a different epistemology within the ethnic and cultural factions of the Presbyterian church: 1) the search for doctrinal purity (subscription debates), 2) the proper education of the clergy (qualification debates), 3) itinerant preaching (synodical authority debates), 4) proper theological grounding (epistemological debates). See Cornman, *Caterpillars*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Chapters 2 and 5 go into detail on Jonathan Dickinson and the history of Presbyterian discord in the 1720s and 1730s in effort to understand Dickinson’s pastoral approach of pursuing the purity and unity of the Presbyterian Church. There is a great deal to be recovered from Dickinson for contemporary Presbyterians. Our purpose in tracing the Presbyterian conflicts in this chapter is to provide a high-level, low-detail synopsis of the earliest American Presbyterian conflicts as they gave context to the PCA’s founding.

<sup>25</sup> See S. Donald Fortson, *Colonial Presbyterianism: Old Faith in a New Land: Commemorating the 300th Anniversary of the First Presbytery in America* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2007), 63–85.

put it: “We consider the foregoing adopting act as one of the most curious compositions that we ever read. It seems to us to give and take, say and re-say, find and loose, from the beginning to the end.”<sup>26</sup>

The Adopting Act of 1729 is frequently lauded as a sensible compromise between the Dickinson party who were opposed to any subscription at all, and those who favored strict subscription.<sup>27</sup> The Adopting Act allowed for ministers to subscribe to the Westminster Standards while petitioning their Presbyteries for acceptance of any scruples they wish to advance. It would be up to the Synods or Presbyteries to decide which scruples were acceptable insofar as they may touch on good and necessary articles of religion.<sup>28</sup> This is known to church history as Good Faith Subscription, which, in 2002, the PCA self-consciously adopted as its own practice.<sup>29</sup>

The tensions surrounding the Adopting Act might have remained in the confines of church courts if not for the arrival of the Great Awakening. Among the New Side, pro-awakening faction was William Tennent, Sr.. His lament over a lack of access to the kind of theological training required for young men called to the ministry led him to establish his own training center based out of his home, which came to be known as The

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<sup>26</sup> Luder Whitlock, Jr., “The Context of the Adopting Act,” in David W Hall, *The Practice of Confessional Subscription* (Oak Ridge, TN: Covenant Foundation, 2001), 99–100.

<sup>27</sup> Fortson, *Colonial Presbyterianism*, 63–85. See also William S. Barker, “The Hemphill Case, Benjamin Franklin and Subscription to the Westminster Confession,” *American Presbyterians* 69, no. 4 (1991): 243–256. The precise meaning of the Adopting Acts remains debated in Presbyterian scholarship. For reading on all sides of the debate, see David W Hall, *The Practice of Confessional Subscription* (Oak Ridge, TN: Covenant Foundation, 2001), 149–236, and S. Donald Fortson, *The Presbyterian Creed: A Confessional Tradition in America, 1729-1870*, Studies in Christian History and Thought (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 1–37.

<sup>28</sup> The phrase, “Good Faith Subscription” does not appear in the doctrinal standards of the PCA. However, the practice is codified in the Book of Church Order 21-4.e., “While our Constitution does not require the candidate’s affirmation of every statement and/or proposition of doctrine in our Confession of Faith and Catechisms, it is the right and responsibility of the Presbytery to determine if the candidate is out of accord with any of the fundamentals of these doctrinal standards and, as a consequence, may not be able in good faith sincerely to receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.”

<sup>29</sup> For a summary of the decision to adopt Good Faith Subscription in the PCA, see, <http://www.presbyteriannews.org/volumes/v8/3/pr33.pdf>, accessed February 10, 2023.

Log College, and attracted and trained exclusively New Side men and sent them into churches and Presbyteries around Philadelphia.<sup>30</sup>

The best of the New Side men were as committed to Reformed orthodoxy as the Old Side men, but with the added emphasis on the experiential religion of both clergy and laity. Dickinson's sermon, "Who is on the Lord's Side," is one of hundreds of examples of New Side Calvinism with added emphasis on experiential religion,

I will add a few brief directions and so conclude, 1) then take up a deliberate settled resolution to be the Lord's. You have perhaps had many sudden pangs of conscience heretofore that have awakened in you some purposes and designs on a new life, but what are become of them? 2) Labour to be deeply sensible of your utter inability to fulfill such resolution...3) cast yourselves at the footstool of divine grace and with ardent importunity beg God that he will work in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. Come to God with a humble sense of your own impotency and utter inability to help yourselves. Acknowledge at his footstool that you have a hard heart which you cannot change; that you have powerful lusts which you cannot mortify; that you have vile affections which you cannot renew; that you cannot come unto Christ that you might. Acknowledge that you have no claim that God should pity or help you and yet plead with him for his mercy sake for his Son's sake that he will renew your souls by the powerful influences of his blessed spirit.<sup>31</sup>

William Tennent, Sr., the elder statesman of the awakening, was frustrated with his perception of slow progress in gospel endeavors, highlighted by the inaccessibility to theological training, and was animated by the lost state of countless souls in the churches.<sup>32</sup> His son, Gilbert, would soon adopt a belief that most everybody in the pew was spiritually dead. This led to a discernible emphasis on experiential religion and

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<sup>30</sup> Leonard J. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition: A Re-Examination of Colonial Presbyterianism* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1949), 65.

<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Dickinson, "Who is on the Lord's Side?" Manuscript sermon in the Foxcroft Collection, Firestone Library, Princeton University, [n.p.], quoted in Herbert L. Samworth, "Those Astonishing Wonders of His Grace: Jonathan Dickinson and the Great Awakening" (Th.D. Dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1988), 126.

<sup>32</sup> Alan Heimert and Perry Miller, *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1978), xxxii-xxxiii.

further soured the already wary Old Side (pro-subscription and anti-awakening). To the Old Side, the New Side enthusiasms stood out as an aberration of biblical Christianity and thus represented a departure from their Calvinistic heritage and laid another plank on the road to schism.<sup>33</sup> Being supportive of the Great Awakening, the Log College graduates were uniquely characterized by a zeal for evangelistic endeavors, which tied them to the famous ministers of the Awakening, Jonathan Edwards and George Whitfield. However, the fears of the Old Side men were also increasingly becoming reality, as the New Side approach to soul-care opened the door to excesses.<sup>34</sup>

Despite their differences and growing distrust, the Old Side and New Side might have remained together, albeit uncomfortably, if not for the mutual distrust accelerated by the itinerate preaching and imprudent words of some of the New Side men, most notably Gilbert Tennent, in the 1730s.<sup>35</sup>

The second development occurred the following year when Gilbert Tennant made these plans explicit in his sermon preached at Nottingham, Pennsylvania. In Perry Miller's opinion this is "one of the most severely abusive sermons that was ever penned." Tennant called his fellow clergymen "lepers," "plague-sores" and "worms" and told his listeners to abandon their ministers and attach themselves to evangelical preachers.

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<sup>33</sup> For an account of the enthusiasms that troubled the Old Side, see Douglas L. Winiarski, "Souls Filled with Ravishing Transport: Heavenly Visions and the Radical Awakening in New England," *William and Mary Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (January 1, 2004): 3-21.

<sup>34</sup> See D.G. Hart, "Old Side/New Side Schism and Reunion" in Fortson, *Colonial Presbyterianism*, 157-179. Hart is a proponent of the Old Side but is fair in his presentation of the New Side concerns during the Great Awakening.

<sup>35</sup> Itinerate preaching was the practice of some New Side men to occupy vacant pulpits, even across presbytery boundaries, to extol the virtues of the awakening.

But this sermon was more than a savage attack upon the settled ministers; it was a blueprint for a new ecclesiastical order in the middle colonies.<sup>36</sup>

Tennent's famously punitive sermon, "*The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry*," in 1740, aimed at the Old Side men, all but guaranteed the young Presbyterian Church would soon split.

Although he later apologized for his intemperance, the damage was done.<sup>37</sup> Distrust and disunity lurked until the following year's schism. Presbyterians remained a formally divided church from 1741-1758, taking the names Synod of Philadelphia (Old Side) and Synod of New York (New Side).<sup>38</sup>

The Great Awakening and the rocky years that preceded it created a climate where Presbyterians could draw lines of conviction. The purity and unity of the church always hang in the balance of those convictions because they are frequently presented as mutually exclusive. In today's PCA, there remains a tenuous balance. On the one hand, most ministers support the overarching concern of the New Side of the Great Awakening because of its emphasis on experiential religion and the new birth. On the other hand, there remains a healthy respect for the Old Side because of its caution about the excesses

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<sup>36</sup> David C. Harlan, "The Travail of Religious Moderation: Jonathan Dickinson and the Great Awakening," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 61, no. 4 (1983): 417. Harlan may overstate that Tennent's sermon proved a blueprint for a new ecclesiastical order in the middle colonies. To assert a new blueprint, one must find that a pattern was established of similarly abusive sermons and intrusions. It is beyond dispute that the New Side engaged in itinerate preaching in parishes not their own, even, in the extreme, called upon members to leave their home churches if they were led by Old School ministers. But Harlan appears to assert that Tennent's abrasive approach was established as a blueprint for the New Side ministry. This is not sustained by the historical record, as many of the New Side men approached the Awakening with uncertainty or even ambivalence, leaving behind a curvy line of vacillating opinions on the rightness or wrongness of Old Side ministers. Ironically, see Harlan, "Travail," 411-412.

<sup>37</sup> Tennent's apology came in the form of his sermon, *Irenicum*, in 1749.

<sup>38</sup> It is worth noting that when the Presbyterians ended their schism, formally, they elected Gilbert Tennent to be the first moderator of the reunited Synod in 1758. There is little doubt his *Irenicum* contributed to a high view of his ministry after the difficulties. See William S. Barker and Samuel T. Logan, eds., *Sermons That Shaped America: Reformed Preaching from 1630 to 2001* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Pub, 2003), 123.

of experiential religion and its confessional commitment to the pure doctrines of the church.<sup>39</sup> Darrel Hart looks on the 1741 schism's importance to understanding contemporary Presbyterianism,

What this episode in colonial American Presbyterian history suggests is that the controversy among the original American Presbyterians determined to a large degree the character of Presbyterianism in the United States, even to the point of misreading the significance of the Old Side/New Side controversy.<sup>40</sup>

The character of the PCA is still determined by, “this episode in colonial American Presbyterian history.” William Barker and Samuel Logan assess the colonial Presbyterian struggle much the same way, though with more pointed questions for the contemporary church. Speaking of the animating principles of the two sides, experiential religion for the one and doctrinal boundaries for the other, they observe,

To whatever degree these emphases were associated with the deferring ethnic backgrounds of middle colony Presbyterians, it is true that as in recent years in the Presbyterian Church in America and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, these emphases did lead to slightly differing views on what was most important in safeguarding this specific identity of the young denomination. Was it the requirement of precise doctrinal orthodoxy or was it the requirement of a credible profession of personal faith in Christ? Regardless of how, if at all, those matters are resolved, it is critical for us to recognize that these were issues dominating the church both before and after [the Adopting Act of] 1729...what are the minimum requirements for ministerial ordination in the church? How can or should those requirements be met, and even more significantly, how can or should they be measured? Even if we grant that both head and heart must be right, where should be the focus of Presbyterian examination of ministerial candidates? Should those with slight deviations in doctrine be treated differently from those with slight deviations in personal piety? Should the *lives* of candidates receive the same scrutiny as or even greater scrutiny than the *beliefs* of candidates? (Emphasis original)<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> See L. Roy Taylor, “Practical Benefits and Dangers of Subscription,” in David W. Hall, *The Practice of Confessional Subscription* (Oak Ridge, TN: Covenant Foundation, 2001), 311–321.

<sup>40</sup> Hart, “Old Side/New Side Schism and Reunion,” in Fortson, *Colonial Presbyterianism*, 159.

<sup>41</sup> Barker and Logan, eds., *Sermons That Shaped America*, 121-122.

So, which is better for the PCA, the fire of experiential religion or the guardrails of doctrinal purity? To accept that question as an either/or proposition is to do damage to the purity and unity of the church, because both are necessary for a healthy PCA. When the PCA was formed the founding generation tried to capture the best of both the Old Side's orderly doctrine and practice and the best of the New Side's evangelistic fervor to create a unity of faith around shared commitment to evangelical piety and confessional Presbyterianism.<sup>42</sup>

The motto of the PCA captures the diverse emphases of the founders of this denomination: true to the scriptures, to the reformed faith and obedient to the Great Commission.<sup>43</sup> Each of the clauses highlights the emphasis of a particular segment of the denomination, even to the present. Those who emphasize the priority of being true to the scriptures may be identified as the pietists in the denomination, seeking individual and experiential Christianity.<sup>44</sup> Generally, the pietist is motivated by vibrant fellowship with Christ and seeks to orient his life around the principles of godliness. Historically, the pietist may be identified most closely with the best of the New Side during the Great Awakening of the early 1740s.

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<sup>42</sup> See Tim Keller, "What's So Great About the PCA." (presentation, annual meeting of the General Assembly of the PCA, Nashville, TN, June 30, 2010), 11. See also Tim Keller's assessment of the early PCA dual commitment to confessional integrity and the fire of mission at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fDBZVQixReA&t=4s>, accessed June 29, 2023.

<sup>43</sup> See Wayne Sparkman's summary of the history of the PCA motto at, Wayne Sparkman, "Faithful to the Scriptures, True to the Reformed faith, and Obedient to the Great Commission," *This Day in Presbyterian History*, September 6, 2017, accessed June 9, 2023, <https://thisday.pcahistory.org/2017/09/september-6-4/>.

<sup>44</sup> Keller, "What's So Great About the PCA," June 2010, 9–10. In this paper, Keller gives an overview the historical roots of each of the three branches of the PCA and the contribution they can each make to the overall health of the denomination. He includes a warning against the impulse of some to remove one of the branches or to severely limit its influence.

The doctrinalists, on the other hand, may be identified with the second clause of the motto: true to the reformed faith. This segment of the PCA tends to prioritize the reformed heritage of our fathers with an impulse toward the historical and traditional and is more likely to be suspicious of the pietist impulse toward individual experience.<sup>45</sup> In that sense, the doctrinalists may be closely aligned with the best of Old Side of the Great Awakening. This is the segment of the Presbyterian body most likely to emphasize the ordinary means of grace (Word, Sacraments and Prayer) as the force of pastoral ministry and is generally motivated by theological precision.

The third segment within the PCA consists of those emphasizing obedience to the Great Commission. This segment is frequently termed the culturalists because they tend to be more open to innovation, if innovation is needed, to advance the Great Commission.<sup>46</sup> This branch is generally more motivated by the idea of *semper reformanda* than the others.<sup>47</sup>

Hart is correct. The Great Awakening and the subsequent schism of the church shapes the character of contemporary Presbyterianism. Each of the segments of the PCA has a place in the life of the denomination when held in balance with the others.<sup>48</sup> When viewed as a healthy diversity of gifting within the body, the three segments with their impulses can promote the PCA as an example of a healthy body building itself up in love. It is up to each of the segments to carry itself so as not to raise suspicion among the others, and it is up to each segment to avoid viewing the others with suspicion.

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<sup>45</sup> Keller, "What's So Great About the PCA," 9.

<sup>46</sup> Keller, "What's So Great About the PCA," 10.

<sup>47</sup> Keller, "What's So Great About the PCA," 10.

<sup>48</sup> Keller, "What's So Great About the PCA," 15-20.

Otherwise, there is little trust, love, and support within the body, which in turn almost guarantees the inability for the Presbyterian body to build itself up in love.

### **Connecting the Nature of the Church to the PCA's Pursuit of Purity and Unity: The Spirituality of the Church**

In 1837 the Presbyterians split again. Cracks in the Presbyterian communion appeared long before, however. It is discernable that the 1837 division was over four primary conflicts: 1) a failure to discipline ministers, especially over doctrinal errors, 2) growing latitudinarianism, 3) the 1801 Plan of Union, and 4) the question of synodical authority as it relates to missions.<sup>49</sup> These conflicts conspired to create two distinct schools of thought coalescing around the existential question of the church, and in particular, her mission.

Each side viewed the other as a legitimate threat to the Presbyterian system and each leered at the other with heavy suspicion. The looming question of slavery and the church's responsibility to address the issue of emancipation (either in favor of or opposition to it) gave further clarity to the increasing bifurcation of 19<sup>th</sup> century Presbyterianism and served as the platform for adapting the doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church to a southern Presbyterian context, which further split the Presbyterian body

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<sup>49</sup> The Albert Barnes affair is noted among historians of 19<sup>th</sup> century Presbyterianism as the major doctrinal crisis that hastened the eventual 1837 split. Barnes had written a disputed commentary on Romans and was tried for heresy at the General Assembly. His exoneration led conservatives to leave and form a new denomination over concerns about theological laxity and an unwillingness to discipline within the ranks of the church courts. Both conservatives and liberals voted to exonerate him in 1831, a fact that causes some to see the Barnes affair as less a dividing line than other crises.

and remains a disputed doctrine among contemporary PCA ministers.<sup>50</sup>

The Plan of Union and the problems associated with The Second Great Awakening helped arouse the passions of old school Presbyterians toward efforts at preserving a pure church.<sup>51</sup> Maintaining an impartial spirit in doing so, however, proved impossible when the slavery issue was brought to the surface. As the middle years of the nineteenth century approached, the northern churches increasingly agreed with the cultural sentiment to move toward immediate emancipation. Thompson notes that the religious leaders were more influential than the secular abolitionists when it came to generating support for the movement. Even some southern Presbyterians in favor of immediate emancipation fled their native land to a more favorable setting to help bring slavery to an end. However, they insisted that all slaveholders, even those who agreed the institutional should be ended but could not find a way to, “rid themselves of its burden,” should be excommunicated. They helped arouse the passions of the northern

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<sup>50</sup> See Alan D. Strange, *The Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church in the Ecclesiology of Charles Hodge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), 341-343. Peter Wallace compellingly updates a commonly held notion that the doctrine of the spirituality of the church was developed by 19<sup>th</sup> century Old School Presbyterians in the south. He notes, instead, “It is perhaps better to see it as a nineteenth-century version of an ancient Christian doctrine, with roots in Augustine’s vision of the city of man and the city of God...the doctrine of the spirituality of the church has medieval roots as well...Gregory VII insisted that since the church is a spiritual body, only the church could invest men with spiritual authority. The medieval church exercised significant temporal power, but the seeds of the distinction had been sown. The Reformed churches renounced the exercise of temporal power but remained closely allied to the state. Scottish Presbyterians, in particular, jealously guarded the “spiritual independence of the church” against the English to resist state encroachment on ecclesiastical prerogatives. But for the Scots, as for most Christians since the days of Augustine, the state was supposed to support and encourage the church, even to the point of enforcing church discipline. The question for Old School Presbyterians was how to adapt this vision of the spirituality of the church to their disestablished denominational status in the United States...They argued that they were merely being more consistent than their forefathers.” See especially chapter 10, “Constitutional construction and Presbyterian boards: law, equity and the spirituality of the church” in Peter Wallace, “The Bond of Union: The Old School Presbyterian Church and the American Nation, 1837-1861” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2004), 694-700.

<sup>51</sup> The 1801 Plan of Union opened the door to broadening theological acceptance in the Presbyterian church through the supply of ministers trained in New England under Taylorism. The result of the latitudinarianism was a loss of the church’s purity, which in turn compromised the church’s unity.

pulpits against both the institution of slavery and the slaveholders themselves, which passions in turn helped make the war almost inevitable.<sup>52</sup>

The war that was soon to be fought, however, took place as much in the courts of the Presbyterian church as on the battle fields of the fracturing nation. The doctrine of the spirituality of the church became inextricably linked to the problem of chattel slavery. Alan Strange correctly identifies the doctrine with the Presbyterian discord in ways that shaped the very character of southern Presbyterianism,

The ways in which Presbyterians interacted with slavery, defending it or opposing it, became a major preoccupation for the church in the 1830's and later, especially for developing the doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church.<sup>53</sup>

John Holt Rice (1777-1831) was the earliest influential minister in the south to advocate for a spiritual mission of the church using the question of slavery as his platform. From his pen came something of a rudimentary doctrine of the non-secular notion, or the spiritual nature, of the church's mission. He believed that religion would get in the way of societal progress. Rice was in favor of emancipation but did not wish for the church to speak on the matter, for fear that parishioners would reject the proposal of emancipation because they would believe the church to be meddling in economic and civil affairs.

The reason I am so opposed to any movement by the church, or the ministers of religion on this subject, is simply this: I am convinced that anything we can do will injure religion, and retard the march of public feeling in relation to slavery. I take the case to be just this: as slavery exists among us, the only possible chance of deliverance is by making the people willing to get rid of it. At any rate, it is this or physical force. The problem to be solved is, to produce that state of the public will, which will cause the people to move spontaneously to the eradication of the evil. Slaves by law are held as

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<sup>52</sup> Ernest Trice Thompson, *The Spirituality of the Church: A Distinctive Doctrine of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1961), 22-23.

<sup>53</sup> Strange, *The Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church*, 176.

property. If the church or minister touches upon the subject, it is touching what are called the rights of property.<sup>54</sup>

Rice believed that the slaves should be free people and that his own slave-state of Virginia should be rid of the evil system. He also believed that the church should refrain from speaking about the situation not because of an ecclesiastical theology that prevented them from speaking to societal matters, but for the pragmatic reason that too many citizens would feel infringed upon if the clergy waded into their property rights. With the 1827 General Assembly approaching and already fearing an agitated meeting, Rice wrote again to a friend,

I am confident that already material injury has been done in the way of impeding the progress in this country against slavery. There is a march of opinion on the subject, which would, if uninterrupted, at no distant date, annihilate this evil in Virginia...I have long had it as an object dearest to my heart to get Virginia free from slavery. I feel that the direct exertions of the church hinder the work.<sup>55</sup>

From the collection of his letters, it is evident that Dr. Rice was a kind man with a sensitive conscience related to the slavery question. It is discernable, however, that his unwillingness to preach and publicly denounce the institution, while privately wishing for its demise, gave freedom to old school Presbyterians after him to maintain the social status quo at times by appealing to the spiritual nature of the church, while at other times arguing that the church must apply the renewing power of the gospel to all spheres of society. This is the precise dispute that led to the difference of opinions surrounding the

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<sup>54</sup> William Maxwell, *A Memoire of the Rev. John H. Rice, D.D.* (Philadelphia, PA: J. Whetham, 1835), 306.

<sup>55</sup> Maxwell, *A Memoire*, 312-313.

43<sup>rd</sup> and 44<sup>th</sup> PCA General Assemblies with respect to repenting of sins connected to race relations in the years immediately preceding the formation of the PCA.<sup>56</sup>

Benjamin Morgan Palmer, a noted skilled and passionate orator of old school southern Presbyterianism, argued vociferously that the church is spiritual in nature and must not merge its mission with the politics of his day. Prior to the agitation of emancipation, however, the same Palmer said, “Religion does not exclude, but rather...embraces all the societal relations of man.”<sup>57</sup> The sort of inconsistent application of the spirituality of the church exhibited by Palmer foreshadows the current disharmony among contemporary Presbyterians when it comes to the nature of the church.

By the end of the 1830s, the seeds were sown for a showdown between New School Presbyterians in favor a church that exercised its prophetic voice in culture to the extent that it felt an obligation to use its pulpits to promote societal change respecting slavery, and Old School Presbyterians who, regardless of their views on slavery, were threatened by emancipation agitators and were eager to exercise its pastoral voice, believing its sphere was limited to what James Henley Thornwell called, “The society of

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<sup>56</sup> For a lengthy discussion on the personal resolution that was proposed to the 43<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rd9jauNXs54>, accessed May 23, 2023. The original personal resolution may be found at <https://theaquilareport.com/pca-general-assembly-refers-personal-resolution-on-personal-resolution-on-civil-rights-remembrance-to-the/>, accessed May 23, 2023. It contains six preamble statements that draw special attention to the PCA’s history with the Civil Rights Movement, followed by three resolutions, “Be it therefore resolved, that the 43<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America does recognize and confess our church’s covenantal and generational involvement in and complicity with racial injustice inside and outside of our churches during the Civil Rights period; and Be it further resolved, that this General Assembly recommit ourselves to the task of truth and reconciliation with our African American brothers and sisters for the glory of God and the furtherance of the Gospel; and Be it finally resolved, that the General Assembly urges the congregations of the Presbyterian Church in America to confess their own particular sins and failures as may be appropriate and to seek to further truth and reconciliation for the Gospel’s sake within their own local communities.”

<sup>57</sup>Jack P. Maddex, “From Theocracy to Spirituality: The Southern Presbyterian Reversal on Church and State,” *Journal of Presbyterian History*, 54 no 4 (Winter 1976), 439.

the redeemed.”<sup>58</sup> Emboldened by the actions of the 1818 General Assembly’s statement on slavery, New School men believed slaveholding was a sin, so that those who held slaves must either repent and emancipate their slaves, or be excommunicated.<sup>59</sup> Southern Old School men viewed the North as agitating a sensitive subject and were speaking from an undeserved position of moral superiority. The environment of these two divergent schools of thought is best described by E.T. Thompson,

Opposition to slavery, of course, did not immediately cease, especially in the upper South. Rev. Amasa Converse, editor of the *Christian Observer*, Rev. Henry Ruffner, President of Washington College, and Rev. Robert J. Breckenridge of Kentucky, were among its critics, and the two latter advocated gradual emancipation. But it became more and more difficult for a man to speak in opposition to slavery, and there came a time when a minister who spoke against the institution could no longer hold his pulpit. More than one fled to the freer atmosphere of the North. It was William Birney, a southern Presbyterian layman, who first saw the full significance of the denial of free inquiry and discussion. He developed the theses that slavery was incompatible with the fundamental principle of Americanism and expanded the movement to free the Negro into a movement to preserve the essence of freedom for the white man. It was in this period, and in this atmosphere, that our church developed its peculiar theory of the spirituality of the church. John Calvin, in Geneva, had sought to apply the Gospel to the total life of the community; he believed the church had a responsibility for shaping a Christian civilization. To understand the Southern Presbyterian theory, we must remember that the South, for a generation and more, was on the moral defensive.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Thornwell was the ablest defender of the Spirituality of the Church in Old School Southern Presbyterianism. He wrote that the church, “has no commission to construct society afresh...to change the forms of its political constitutions. The problems, which the anomalies of our fallen state are continually forcing on philanthropy, the Church has no right to solve. She must leave them to the Providence of God, and to human wisdom sanctified and guided by the spiritual influences which it is her glory to foster and to cherish. The Church...has a fixed and unalterable Constitution; and that Constitution is the Word of God...She can announce what it teaches, enjoin what it commands, prohibit what it condemns...Beyond the Bible she can never go, and apart from the Bible she can never speak.” See James Henley Thornwell, “Relation of the Church to Slavery,” in *Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, ed. B. M. Palmer and J. B. Adger, 4 vols. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974), 4:382-384.

<sup>59</sup> James H. Moorhead, “Between Hope and Fear: Presbyterians and the 1818 Statement on Slavery.” *The Journal of Presbyterian History* 96, no. 2 (2018): 48–61.

<sup>60</sup> Thompson, *The Spirituality of the Church*, 24.

The seeds of discord, having been further advanced by the split of 1837 and the unholy expulsions of earnest men, took root and began a division that has never been healed.<sup>61</sup> The Presbyterian Church in the United States lived uneasily with itself during the years preceding the Civil War. With war looming, the 1840s and 1850s proved a time when Old School and New School theologians crystalized their opposing views on the rising problems plaguing the country, and their views may have stayed in the pulpits or seminary classrooms of their respective places had they not been forced to the surface by the pressures of culture. During these years, the ablest defenders of southern Old School Presbyterianism and a robust doctrine of the spirituality of the church were Benjamin Morgan Palmer (1818-1902), Robert L. Dabney (1820-1898) and James H. Thornwell (1812-1862).<sup>62</sup> Each believed the primary mission of the pulpit was spiritual in nature and that cultural progress is best achieved when church membership is motivated by the message of the cross. Their respective ministries in the 1850s, especially, prepared their followers for the tumultuous Civil War era.<sup>63</sup>

The role of the pulpits and the church courts respecting the shifting culture across the United States was, by the early 1860s, rising to a level of great alarm as, broadly speaking, the New School North and the Old School South armed themselves with high-

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<sup>61</sup> The split of 1837/38 eventually led to 4 distinct Presbyterian bodies in the United States.

<sup>62</sup> It should not be assumed, however, that all Old School proponents who supported the doctrine of the spirituality of the church were also supporters of slavery. Charles Hodge, for instance, was a committed Old Schooler who maintained a spiritual view of the church yet believed in a more nuanced use of the doctrine as it applied to the cultural sin of slavery. See Strange, *The Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church*, 42-48. Strange also makes the case that some of the pioneers of the spirituality of the church in the American context were opposed to slavery and even willing to use the pulpits to speak against it. See Strange, *The Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church*, 207-211.

<sup>63</sup> For a contemporary treatment on Thornwell's doctrine of the church, see Christopher C. Cooper, "Binding Bodies and Liberating Souls: Thornwell's Vision for a Spiritual Church and a Christian Confederacy," *The Confessional Presbyterian*, Vol. 9 (2013), 35-47.

level theologians and firm ecclesiologies. In response to rising tensions, each side published. And when they published, the Presbyterians' own little civil war erupted.

By 1861 there were four distinct Presbyterian bodies – The Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (1838-1869, Old School), the Presbyterian Church in the United States of American (1838-1869, New School), the United Synod of the South (1858-1864, New School), and the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America (1861-1864, Old School).<sup>64</sup>

Robert J. Breckenridge (1800-1871) was among the most influential Old School men in the border state of Kentucky in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His views on emancipation, albeit gradual, and the church's moral obligation to speak to cultural sins were forceful, unabashed and more aligned with New School sentiments.<sup>65</sup> On Thanksgiving Day, November 29<sup>th</sup>, 1860, he preached a sermon called, "Our Country: Its Peril and Its Deliverance" in which he seized upon the tensions of the hour and spoke to a multitude of political and social events. The same sermon was preached again on January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1861, and then published in the inaugural edition of *The Danville Quarterly Review*. Breckenridge was as professor at the Danville Theological Seminary, who published the *Review* and helped make his voice heard throughout the South. His status as a pastor, theologian and author made his voice resonate with like-minded men, especially in the North.

In "Our Country" Breckenridge came out strongly in favor of the Constitution and the Union and built the platform for future New School men to take up social issues from

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<sup>64</sup> Fortson, *Colonial Presbyterianism*, xviii, n.11.

<sup>65</sup> Thornwell was a supporter of Breckenridge in terms of polity and while the two agreed on the question of the Plan of Union, they disagreed on the question of the spirituality of the church. Breckenridge, therefore, represents a merging of the sides in the Old School-New School debate. Nevertheless, he was undeniably New School in the matter of the spirituality of the church. For more on this point, see William Robinson, *Columbia Theological Seminary and the Southern Presbyterian Church* (New Delhi: Isha Books, 1931), 69.

the pulpit. He spoke on matters related to secession, the newly elected President Lincoln and the duty of the federal government to guide the nation away from civil war. In particular, Breckenridge spoke of Mr. Lincoln's election in favorable terms, calling for national support even though many in the nation rejected his plans for national unity,

For while Mr. Lincoln is elected president – the majority of the nation is so decidedly against him that he would have been beaten if the power of congress to create uniform electoral districts had ever been exercised...Moreover the solution is further remarkable in this, that both houses of congress and, as is alleged, the Supreme Court of the United States, held his most dangerous opinions to be unconstitutional; and it is still further remarkable in this, that Mr. Lincoln himself...is by universal consent...an able, honest and patriotic man...As indicated by the presidential election in November last, it may be conceded that the majority in all those states did at that time believe the election of Mr. Lincoln to the Presidency to be the best of the alternatives then offered to their choice.<sup>66</sup>

Breckenridge lamented the Christless spirit of the age and watched with concern, and perhaps even scorn, as society seemed to devolve into chaos and moved toward war. He believed it was the duty of the church to call the government to establish just laws to govern all citizens, and to call all citizens to obey those laws. For Breckenridge, this was the most immediate means to avoid escalating the war, advance cultural progress related to emancipation and bring about Christian peace,

To us nothing appears more certain than that looking to either result, the nation has no necessity more imperative, as means to any enduring result, than that the Federal Government – instead of shrinking from its true position on the one hand or resorting to needless violence on the other – should accept its true mission as the representative of the nation, and so to a great extent master of the situation, and pilot the ark in which such transcendent treasures are embarked, courageously amidst the howling waters. God will bring it to the right haven.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Robert Jefferson Breckenridge, *Our Country: Its Peril and Its Deliverance* (Cincinnati, OH: Danville Review, 1861), 5–6.

<sup>67</sup> Breckenridge, *Our Country: Its Peril and Its Deliverance*, 42.

Breckenridge's sermon was typical of the *Danville Quarterly Review* during the war years. As editor, he used his position to advocate a pro-Union position, which earned him favor with New School Presbyterians in the north. The New School was gaining significant ground within the Presbyterian church, and Breckenridge found further pro-Union support at the General Assembly later that year, 1861, with the adoption of the Gardner Spring resolutions calling for the Presbyterian Church to support the Federal Union.

Resolved, that is General Assembly, in the spirit of that Christian patriotism which the Scriptures enjoin, and which has always characterized this Church, do hereby acknowledge and declare our obligation to promote and perpetuate, so far as in us lies, the integrity of these United States, and to strengthen, uphold and encourage the Federal government in the exercise of all its functions, under our noble Constitution, and to this Constitution, in all its provisions, requirements, and principles, we profess our unabated loyalty.<sup>68</sup>

The resolution passed by a vote of 156-66. These words form the centerpiece of the Gardner Spring Resolutions, and when they were adopted, they accomplished two ends: first, they propelled an already eager Southern Presbyterian contingency to proceed with plans to form a new denomination, and second, they helped the 'gentleman theologians' of the south to crystalize their doctrine of the spirituality of the church.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> "Gardiner Spring Resolutions (1861)," accessed October 31, 2023, <https://www.pcahistory.org/documents/gardinerspring.html#1>. Excerpted from Joseph M. Wilson, *The Presbyterian Historical Almanac and Annual Remembrancer of the Church for 1862* (Philadelphia, PA: Joseph M. Wilson, 1862), 69-79.

<sup>69</sup> See E. Brooks Holifield, *The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture, 1795-1860* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1978). Holifield breaks from common scholarship that looks at southern theologians in their mostly rural contexts. He stresses the importance of urban southern theologians for a fuller appreciation of the southern evangelical landscape. He couches his theological study in the classical milieu of southern aristocrat gentlemen.

The distinction between the New School North and the Old School South was not only becoming clearer, it was becoming a gap too wide to cross. The 1801 Plan of Union led to the 1837 Old School / New School split, which in turn led to the 1861 formation of a new denomination. On December 4 of that year, the Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States in America was established, largely in response to what it viewed as a major theological error in the North. For the PCCSA, the North's ungodly habit of delivering political orations from the pulpits and the church courts was a direct assault on the nature and mission of the church and endangered the entire Presbyterian witness. Among the new denomination's commitments was the resolve to keep its pastoral voice confined to the church itself. In the Address to All Churches adopted by the newly formed church, the men of the south told the world their opinion on the relationship of the church to the changing culture,

The provinces of Church and State are perfectly distinct, and the one has no right to usurp the jurisdiction of the other. They are as planets moving in different orbits, and unless each is confined to its own track, the consequences may be disastrous in the moral world, as the collision of different spheres in the world of matter. It is true that there is a point at which their respective jurisdictions seem to meet—in the idea of duty. But even duty is viewed by each in very different lights. The Church enjoins it as obedience to God, and the State enforces it as the safeguard of order. But there can be no collision, unless one or the other blunders as to the things that are materially right.<sup>70</sup>

By contrast, one year later, at the 1862 Old School General Assembly, Breckenridge's paper on the state of the church was adopted, which went even further that the Spring Resolutions the previous year,

It is the clear and solemn duty of the National Government to preserve, at whatever cost, the national Union and Constitution, to maintain the laws in their

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<sup>70</sup> *Minutes of the Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States, Vol. 1* (Augusta, GA: Steam Power Press Chronicle and Sentinel, 1861), 52-53.

supremacy, to crush force by force, and to restore the reign of public order and peace to the entire nation, by whatever lawful means that are necessary thereunto. And it is the bounden duty of the people who compose this great nation, each one in his several place and degree, to uphold the Federal Government, and every State Government, and all persons in authority, whether civil or military, in all their lawful and proper acts, unto the end herein before set forth.<sup>71</sup>

The very next paragraph stated that the church of Christ has no authority whatsoever to counsel treason for any citizen of a nation. Whereas the Old School North had sympathies in favor of the Union, Old School southern Presbyterians, especially the PCCSA, came out for neither the Union nor the Confederacy, at least at its first General Assembly. To believe they did so would be to miss the point of the conflict. Making no statement on the politics of the day, the men of 1861 Augusta came out strongly in favor of a church that exists as a separate planet in a different orbit from secular politics.

While division between the New School and the Old School was caused by a host of reasons, it centered on opposing opinions as to the proper ways to exercise a prophetic and pastoral voice in the ministry. For the New School, the church simply must speak to social sins in order to bring Christ honor in society. For the Old School, the church simply must keep out of political oration and keep its voice confined to the spiritual proclamation of the Gospel. The sides simply never could agree on that issue, despite fervent advocacy among the finest theologians.<sup>72</sup>

The schools of thought were developed out of a strained relationship beginning in 1801, through the heightened tensions of the 1830's and eventually to the impossible

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<sup>71</sup> *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (New York, NY: Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Old School, 1862), 53. <https://archive.org/details/minutesofgeneral1862pres>, accessed June 27, 2023.

<sup>72</sup> Charles Hodge, for instance, was a towering figure at Old Princeton, an old school advocate in the North and believed in a modified version of the spirituality of the church. For more on Hodge and the nature of the church, see Strange, *The Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church*, 162-174.

dynamic of the Civil War era.<sup>73</sup> It is a division that has never been healed, as even the Presbyterian Church in America today, as the offspring of the Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States, still lives with an uneasy tension on the issue of the nature and mission of the church. As the PCA has grown in its first fifty years to a big-tent reformed, Presbyterian body, achieving church's purity and unity remains an elusive goal largely because the peculiar doctrine of the spirituality of the church remains a disputed value.

### **Tracing the Modernist Movement in the South to the PCA's Pursuit of Purity and Unity: The Inerrancy and Sufficiency of the Word of God**

In 1865, with the end of the confederacy, the PCCSA became the Presbyterian Church United States. It was a decidedly Old School Presbyterian body and welcomed several smaller southern Presbyterian bodies into its membership during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>74</sup> That era saw the rise of several Presbyterian conflicts that propelled southern conservative Presbyterians toward the establishment of a new denomination a century later, the most important of which was the rise of modernism.

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<sup>73</sup> Attempts were made early after the 1861 schism toward reunion of Old School and New School. "Such movement started in 1862 when a number of old school presbyteries requested that the General Assembly begin conversations with the new school about reunion. Though the Assembly decided against this option, they did adopt a motion to propose the exchange of fraternal delegates between the General Assemblies of the two churches. In 1863 the new school furthered the impetus toward reunion by adopting a statement composed by a committee on church polity that argued that 'the tendency of modern society, the condition of Protestant Christianity, the increase of infidelity, the progress of Romanism, and the present and prospective state of our country afford powerful arguments and favor that union and unity of the church into which it is to grow.'" Bradley J. Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture: A History*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 113.

<sup>74</sup> For instance, in 1864 the United Synod of the South joined the PCCSA, and between 1865 and 1874, the list of those joining the PCUS includes the presbyteries of Alabama and Kentucky from the Associate Reformed Church and several others.

Just after the turn of the century, conservative Presbyterians and a growing liberal spirit within the church were jousting, once again, over the nature of the church. This era, however, added the hotly contested issue of biblical inerrancy and authority.

Since the close of the war liberals and conservatives had been sparring on such issues as biblical authority, evolution, and foreign missions. In response to the escalating militancy of the fundamentalists, Fosdick launched a counter offensive and thereby precipitated the Presbyterian controversy.<sup>75</sup>

Harry Emerson Fosdick was the lightning rod that started the Fundamentalist / Modernist controversy when he preached his sermon, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" in the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, New York City, on May 21, 1922. First Presbyterian Church was a New School Presbyterian church. Fosdick was a liberal theologian who had grown weary of the conservatives', whom he called Fundamentalists, insistence on key biblical doctrines. Among his targets was the virgin birth, the historicity of miracles in general, and the inerrancy and sufficiency of the bible. In his view, culture was changing so rapidly that the church was in danger of becoming obsolete if it stubbornly held to its old notions of divine revelation. For Fosdick and a growing number of fellow Presbyterians, the modern world called for a modern religion freed from the shackles of lore and blind acceptance.<sup>76</sup> After the American Civil War, new and different revolutions were afoot, including a sort of intellectual curiosity that could not help but influence the religious life of Presbyterians. Rising interest in Darwinian ideas of evolution coincided with German Higher Criticism in the academy to open a new front in a war for contemporary orthodoxy.

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<sup>75</sup> Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy*, 9.

<sup>76</sup> For a summary of Fosdick's beliefs as they appeared to his congregation, see John B. Macnab, "Fosdick at First Church," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 52, no. 1 (1974): 59–77.

In the intellectual arena, Darwin's evolutionary hypothesis and the new higher criticism of the scriptures challenged cherished notions about the bible's accuracy and authority...These challenges to the culture were aggravated by unprecedented social change. Massive immigration added new hues, languages, and religions to the American landscape. Industrialization changed the way Americans earned their livings and where they lived. Cities swelled as foreigners and natives moved to urban areas while millionaire entrepreneurs, proclaiming a gospel of wealth, became America's heroes. By 1900 the United States was the world's industrial leader. In all areas of life, change occurred at an unprecedented pace. The United States was coming face to face with modernity.<sup>77</sup>

Fosdick's whole-hearted embrace of modernity and his theological views might have remained a relatively private affair, tucked away in a corner pulpit, if not for his engagement with three-time presidential nominee William Jennings Bryan over the growing issue of evolutionary theory. The New York Times published the manuscript of a debate between the two, which garnered the attention of America's intellectual and religious leaders.

Among those to sense Fosdick represented a threat to the purity of Christian doctrine was Clarence Macartney, who answered Fosdick's "Shall the Fundamentalists Win" with a sermon of his own, "Shall Unbelief Win," and published in *The Presbyterian*. Battle lines were drawn over the sufficiency of the Word of God within the Presbyterian body,

Having rallied the troops, McCartney sounded the call to charge. Led by McCartney, the presbytery of Philadelphia requested the General Assembly to, "direct the presbytery of New York to take such action as will require the preaching and teaching in the First Presbyterian Church of New York City to conform to the system of doctrine taught in the confession of faith." The issue was thus joined. Fosdick had thrown down the gauntlet, challenging conservatives to tolerate their liberal teachings. Militant traditionalist Presbyterians took up the challenge with a vengeance. More

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<sup>77</sup> Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy*, 12.

tolerant conservatives, drawn into the battle by those on either extreme, would eventually be forced to choose sides. There was no turning back.<sup>78</sup>

Conservatives sensed that theological toleration would soon lead to the demise of the Presbyterian Church. Doctrinal standards, especially the inerrancy and sufficiency of the bible, simply must be advanced and maintained if the Presbyterian church was to maintain her purity and unity.

Parallel to the modernist insistence on new understandings of scripture was the growth of German Higher Criticism as a hermeneutic for the modern times. If modernism rattled from the pulpits, Higher Criticism did so from the seminaries.

Though most commonly considered a northern problem, Higher Criticism opened a new frontier in southern Presbyterian thought, as well, which Sean Lucas calls, “progressive conservatism” in the southern church.<sup>79</sup> In 1883, Robert Lewis Dabney left Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, the south most important seminary of the day, for the University of Texas to teach moral philosophy. He had been a stalwart at Union, maintaining the importance of the Spirituality of the Church and giving his many graduates a decidedly conservative character as they filled the southern pulpits. His departure, however, coincided with the rise of Higher Criticism, which soon took root at Union.

James Fair Latimer, professor of ecclesiastical history with a Ph.D. from Leipzig University in Germany, joined the [Union] faculty in 1884. But most importantly, Walter W. Moore joined the faculty as an adjunct professor of Hebrew in 1883. Moore would influence generations of students at union seminary with his progressive conservatism, both as professor of Old Testament and later as the seminary’s first president. Moore was personally conservative and held to the “plenary theory of inspiration” but hesitated to place certain views on the inspiration of

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<sup>78</sup> Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy*, 11.

<sup>79</sup> Lucas, *For a Continuing Church*, 16.

scripture out of bounds as long as the ministerial candidate held to the fundamentals of the system of doctrine contained in the Westminster standards. Moore confided... "We must have more liberty in our church or there's going to be an explosion. In my judgment there is nothing more certain as to the future of our church than that we must allow a subscription to the system of doctrine, without trying to tie men down to every statement of detail." [James I.] Vance would embrace this broadening view of doctrine and apply it throughout his ministry.<sup>80</sup>

The 1880s was a transitional decade for southern Presbyterians as theological drift, particularly on the doctrine of Scripture, slowly took hold, despite the assurances of the Union faculty to the contrary. In that decade, the faculty found the ability to proclaim the importance of the verbal, plenary inspiration of the scripture while also denying it as a fundamental doctrine of the Presbyterian church.

The growing trend at Union Seminary was of some alarm to the southern Presbyterian church, although history informs us that the alarm should have been louder. Less emphasis on the infallibility and inerrancy of the Word of God, together with the influence of German trained Higher Critical scholars meant that the seminary was increasingly producing and sending men to the pulpits of the PCUS armed with liberal theology. Total depravity, the need of the atoning sacrifice of Christ, the value of doctrinal precision, and personal holiness were increasingly replaced with the social gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch, a proponent of Higher Criticism. For the growing liberal constituency of the PCUS, the bible was no longer the reliable source of truth or doctrine but must be re-examined in light of modernity if the church was to have any future at all.

A key figure in the broadening of southern Presbyterian thought was James Vance. Vance had been a student at Union during the transitional years from Dabney's

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<sup>80</sup> Lucas, *For a Continuing Church*, 15-16.

orthodoxy to the rise of Higher Criticism and was one of the seminary's prized graduates. E.T. Thompson refers to his preaching ability and influence as, "unexcelled."<sup>81</sup> Vance's influence helped give shape to the loosening of southern Presbyterian dogma, especially as it related to his view of scripture and predestination. Upon assuming the pulpit at First Presbyterian Church, Nashville, Vance promoted his views on the south's first major, clear-channel radio station.<sup>82</sup> Through his radio ministry he continued to eschew traditional southern Presbyterian convictions and the "niceties" of classical Calvinism in favor of sentimental Christianity devoid of the doctrines of grace.<sup>83</sup> Vance's influence can hardly be overstated. Startingly, he was celebrated as the voice to carry the southern church into its future because one could not easily tell if he was a Calvinist or an Arminian.<sup>84</sup>

Vance and others had succeeded in giving a new character to the southern Presbyterian church. Thompson summarizes the results of Vance and the growing liberalism of the south in the early twentieth century,

A more open attitude toward new truth, a greater readiness to re-examine old traditions, in fact an increasing determination to throw off the dead hand of the past, had begun to appear in both student body and faculty, and increasingly among the ministry, throughout the church.<sup>85</sup>

By the early twentieth century, Southern Presbyterians, though formally united, were experiencing the strain of shifting values within the communion. One publication picked up on the growing schismatic character of the assembly by noting the existence of

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<sup>81</sup> Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1973), 3:223.

<sup>82</sup> See Lucas, *For a Continuing Church*, 21.

<sup>83</sup> Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 3:223.

<sup>84</sup> Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 3:223.

<sup>85</sup> Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 3:224.

two parties that was highly noticeable to any observer, for they each lined up on opposite sides of issue after issue at each General Assembly.<sup>86</sup> The two sides were noted as, “progressives” and “ultra conservatives,” with a group of so-called, “stand-patters, reactionaries and the like”<sup>87</sup> observing the beginnings of division that would last until 1973 and the forming of the PCA.

Into this arena stepped J. Gresham Machen<sup>88</sup> and his book, *Christianity and Liberalism*, which went point by point to dismantle theological liberalism in the Presbyterian church and proved to be of great value to conservative southern Presbyterians. His conclusion was not that liberalism was an aberrant theology, but that liberalism was a different religion altogether,

It may appear that what the liberal theologian has retained after abandoning to the enemy one Christian doctrine after another is not Christianity at all, but a religion which is so entirely different from Christianity as to belong in a different category...modern liberalism may be criticized (1) on the ground that it is un-Christian and (2) on the ground that it is unscientific.<sup>89</sup>

Machen sensed he was on a divine errand to preserve not simply the purity and unity of the Presbyterian church, but to preserve the church itself,

The spring of 1923 brought no time for Machen to rest on his well deserved laurels. As he had so eloquently explained, liberal theology threatened to destroy the witness of the church and with it all true liberty and culture. Only a rebirth of Christianity founded on a solid intellectual defense of orthodox doctrines could stop the spiritual decline of the age. The battle in the Presbyterian Church, though only one battle in a mighty worldwide war,

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<sup>86</sup> *The Presbyterian of the South*, 88, no.22 (June 3, 1914): 9.

<sup>87</sup> *The Presbyterian of the South*, 9.

<sup>88</sup> The long and important history of Machen, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the founding of Westminster Theological Seminary is important but beyond the purview of this project. For an excellent exposé of Machen’s life and importance, see J. Gresham Machen, *Selected Shorter Writings* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Pub, 2004). See also, “The Reorganization of Princeton and the Birth of Westminster” in Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy*, 162-180.

<sup>89</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 6–7.

was a crucial front. If the fight were lost here, it could very well be lost everywhere.<sup>90</sup>

While Machen's sense of anxiety over the primacy of Presbyterian purity for the sake of the entire gospel witness in the world may be exaggerated, he's not wrong in the sense that Presbyterians knew the battle they were waging had far-reaching consequences. To be a continuing, faithful witness in the world, purity and unity in the church had to be staked out. Liberal theology, free from doctrinal standards and classical expressions of evangelical faith simply had to be put down.

The efforts to put it down were largely paused during World War II, but after the war, Presbyterians in the south were finally confronted with a stark reality. Earlier, in 1909, southern Presbyterians believed whatever drift they might have experienced was yet minimal and took a wait-and-see approach to its remedy.<sup>91</sup> Forty years later, strengthened by faithful men in the North fighting similar battles, they could not and need not deny that liberalism and latitudinarianism had slowly and surely infected the PCUS. For the conservatives in the south, liberalism had become an almost unbearable burden within the Presbyterian church and was particularly sinister insofar as it pulled the church away from its spiritual nature and mission. Gone was the primacy of the Word preached to convince and convert sinners. In its place was increasing advocacy for social engineering and glad partnerships with liberal organizations.<sup>92</sup> This advocacy continued to take the southern church in a leftward direction and proved to be a red line for the

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<sup>90</sup> Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy*, 53.

<sup>91</sup> The Christian Observer noted that while there was doctrinal drift in the southern Presbyterian church and even called it a crisis, the drift had not yet fully infected the church. The Observer called for earnest and constant prayer for the southern church. See Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 3:223.

<sup>92</sup> See Lucas, *For a Continuing Church*, 132-134. This advocacy and doctrinal latitude of the PCUS is what prevented the Old School Presbyterians within the southern church from agreeing to the Plan of Union that would have, and eventually did, bring together the PCUSA and the PCUS.

conservatives. There was a heritage of confrontation over the purity and unity of their beloved church, beginning from the 1741 schism through the modernist controversy of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The PCA's Pursuit of Purity and Unity**

Darrel Hart noted that the course of American Presbyterianism has been determined by the events of colonial struggle for the church. We agree, although we note a broader history for determining the course of the PCA. Not just the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries struggle for the purity and unity of the church also help determine the course of the PCA. The three animating Presbyterian principles that threatened the purity and unity of the PCA are 1) Confessional integrity, 2) the nature and mission of the church, and 3) the inerrancy and sufficiency of the bible. Two of these three, confessional integrity and the nature of the church, remain unsettled in the PCA, while the third, the inerrancy and sufficiency of the Bible, is not openly disputed. Still, each of these were hard fought for in the root system of the PCA. In the early years of Presbyterianism in the colonies, the church struggled for the purity and unity of the church in the context of doctrinal subscription and spiritual awakening. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Presbyterian body struggled for the purity and unity of the church over theological understanding of the nature of the church and her mission. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the southern Presbyterians struggled for the purity and unity of the church over the nature of the gospel and the inerrancy of the Bible.

In a nod to the forefathers at Augusta in 1861, the first General Assembly was held on December 4, 1973. It had come at last after generations of discord and movements to recover the purity and unity of the PCUS. Ruling Elder Jack Williamson

preached the first sermon at the inaugural General Assembly and pointed out the numerous animating principles that had necessitated the new denomination. They included the need for mutual commitment to classical presbyterian doctrines, and especially the commitment to be faithful to the scriptures, the reformed faith and the great commission. Each of these had a connection to over two hundred years of American Presbyterian history. He highlighted the impossibility of unity when there are antecedent problems with the purity of the church.

Against the ecclesiastical drift, the battle for the purity of the PCUS coalesced around four key organizations, each of which was alarmed over the confessional drift, mission drift and loosening commitments to the inerrancy of the Bible in the PCUS. *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* began under Nelson Bell in 1942, though in 1959 it shortened its name to *The Presbyterian Journal* under the leadership of G. Aiken Taylor. A significant animating principle behind Bell establishing *The Journal* was his observation that the same modernism fought in the 1920's northern Presbyterian Church was creeping into the southern church. The *Journal* was prominent in opposition to talk of merger between the liberal PSUSA (the northern Presbyterian church) and the liberal PCUS in 1956. To help consolidate power and steer the PCUS back to orthodoxy, the *Journal* hosted an annual *Journal Day* of like-minded leaders, though open to all, for encouragement and support. *Journal Day* lasted from 1960 to 1980.

In 1958, William Hill and others began the Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship (P.E.F.) in effort to help bring the PCUS back to the basics of the Great Commission. There were five men each committed to doing over 20 multi-day crusades per year.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Presbyterian Church in America, "PCA50: Celebrating God's Faithfulness and Praying For the Church's Future." Accessed June 2, 2023. <http://pca50.org>.

In 1965, the Concerned Presbyterians well announced their vision by the name they adopted. They were, “concerned.” Their concern was over theological drift and creeping liberalism that they perceived had grown within the mainline church. This group was led by Kenneth Keyes and was a layman’s organization aimed at spiritual renewal in the PCUS. From 1965 to 1976 they produced their own publication, *The Concerned Presbyterian Bulletin*. Their target audience was not ministers and elders but was strategically the regular people in the pews to raise awareness of the liberalizing tendency of post-war Presbyterianism in the south.<sup>94</sup>

1969 saw the beginning of the Presbyterian Churchmen United and their newsletter, *Contact*. with the stated goal of, “The organization known as the Presbyterian Churchmen United is the outgrowth of a conviction on the part of certain ministers and officers of the Presbyterian Church, US that a challenge must be offered to the mounting attacks being made in our time against the Church and the Christian faith.”<sup>95</sup> The PCU was the primary organizer for the *Declaration of Commitment* which was viewed as an early statement of faith and commitment to form the PCA.<sup>96</sup>

When their efforts at last failed to bring the sort of reform they were each laboring for, these four groups formed a steering committee with their sights on the new denomination in 1971, setting up continuing Presbyterianism against radical liberalism. The night the PCA formed, Jack Williamson explained the key principle that necessitated the new denomination in his inaugural sermon,

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<sup>94</sup> PCA Historical Center, “Bulletins of the Concerned Presbyterians.” Accessed June 2, 2023. <https://www.pcahistory.org/pca/concerned/bulletins.html>

<sup>95</sup> PCA Historical Center, “Documents of the Presbyterian Churchmen United.” Accessed June 2, 2023. [https://www.pcahistory.org/pca/50th/documents/Presbyterian%20Churchmen%20United/PCU\\_history.pdf](https://www.pcahistory.org/pca/50th/documents/Presbyterian%20Churchmen%20United/PCU_history.pdf).

<sup>96</sup> PCA Historical Center, “Declaration of Commitment.” Accessed June 2, 2023. <https://www.pcahistory.org/pca/50th/documents/Presbyterian%20Churchmen%20United/Declaration.pdf>.

And so, we came to see after three decades that we had to evaluate our position: what came first? Christ came first, separation was the price we had to pay for the principle. We then began to look for a method; the best constitutional method appeared to be the escape clause in the plan of union with the UPCUSA church...[but the] faith which we had placed in them had been broken, we were forced to take an alternative procedure. That procedure brings us here tonight.<sup>97</sup>

The principle for the continuing church was the preeminence of Christ. It was viewed as a first order issue; the doctrine that had been abandoned and must be recovered. Without purity of doctrine and intrinsic trust in the good character of fellow churchmen, separation became unavoidable. Williamson went on to explain that the preeminence of Christ necessitates a resolve toward confessional fidelity, the right application of the spiritual nature of the church and the primacy of the Word of God. These three issues formed the nucleus of Presbyterian convictions at the formation of the PCA as they did in the first three centuries of American Presbyterianism.

Six years earlier Williamson foretold his convictions, the same convictions that would become central to the PCA's identifiable resolve on the purity of the church,

Basic doctrines of our faith and their objects are no longer absolute verities; but we are told "the gospel must be made relevant to our times." Emotionally the whole age is in petulant revolt against order and truth – Illustration: the new morality. Such revolt ultimately means a revolt against God. It springs from that hatred of all discipline which is the last corruption of human nature. Intellectually we live in a defeated age. The age has lost its bearings. The cement of faith has crumbled. We have forgotten our creeds and flounder in a theological chaos. The climate of our day is one of intellectual pride with the insistence that faith is relative and that nothing is absolute. Neat slogans typify this trend – "We preach Christ; not a creed" "Let us propagate the gospel, not argue about it" – But my answer is that "if the trumpet give an uncertain sound who shall prepare himself for the battle?" Let us sound forth the **truth** but let us be sure that that which we sound is **the truth**. (Emphasis original)<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Jack Williamson, *To God Be the Glory*, Audio File, vol. 1, 2 vols., The First General Assembly (Birmingham, AL, 1973).

<sup>98</sup> Jack Williamson, "August 1967 Address on Presbyterian Journal Day," accessed February 8, 2023, [https://pcahistory.org/pca/50th/documents/Williamson\\_1967\\_Journal\\_Day\\_address.html](https://pcahistory.org/pca/50th/documents/Williamson_1967_Journal_Day_address.html).

Later, when asked about the greatest needs the PCA has going forward,

Williamson replied,

A consciousness that God has called us into this denomination to work together in trust and confidence to fulfill this goal, rather than to build isolated, individual kingdoms of grandiose glory which will certainly dissipate in their influence when the dynamic individual who leads them is called to glory. We need, in my judgment, a sense of togetherness, of unity, of what God is doing through us as a group.<sup>99</sup>

Williamson was not alone in his early assessment of the challenges to confessional Presbyterianism ahead. In the first edition of *The Concerned Presbyterian* dated March 1965, it is written,

We are concerned:

- Because the primary mission of the church – winning people to Jesus Christ and nurturing them in the faith – is being compromised today by over-emphasis on social, economic and political matters, forgetting the basic necessity for regeneration.
- Because the integrity and authority of the Word of God are being questioned by dubious theories of revelation in some of the literature of the Church
- Because some Presbyteries no longer require complete loyalty to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms
- Because another determined effort has been started to affect a union of the Presbyterian Church U.S. with the United Presbyterian Church U.S.A. which is now engaged in negotiations to unite with denominations that do not adhere to the Reformed Faith.<sup>100</sup>

*The Concerned Presbyterian* published twenty-eight issues from 1965 to 1973 when the PCA was finally begun.<sup>101</sup> Without exception every issue contained articles that addressed the purity and unity of the church.

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<sup>99</sup> Jack Williamson, “Oral History Interviews with the Founding Fathers,” accessed February 8, 2023, n.d., [https://www.pcahistory.org/pca/50th/oralhistory/williamson\\_jack\\_1980s.pdf](https://www.pcahistory.org/pca/50th/oralhistory/williamson_jack_1980s.pdf).

<sup>100</sup> Kenneth Keyes, “The Concerned Presbyterian,” no. 1 (March 1965): 1.

<sup>101</sup> Concerned Presbyterian continued to publish after the formation of the PCA, albeit with a different leadership board than that which controlled the publication prior to the formation of the PCA.

Three months after these concerned Presbyterians helped found the PCA, Francis Schaeffer reflected on the material cause of the PCA's birth, then called the National Presbyterian Church, contending that it was the faithful pursuit or defense of the purity and unity of contemporary Presbyterianism,

To me, practicing the principle of the purity of the visible church is part of the command of the Word of God. In the PCUS, good men have tried unsuccessfully to practice this principle by combating clearly false teachings at the center of Christian truth. These include the older rationalistic liberalism and the new neo-orthodox, existential liberalism. After having failed to bring purity into the Church, they chose the only way to be obedient--they practiced the principle in reverse and withdrew. Thirty-eight years ago such a division occurred in the Northern Presbyterian Church. Those in the Presbyterian Church US have showed more than long patience in their efforts to bring improvements in their Church from within. However, the formation of the National Presbyterian Church should not be seen as the ending but a beginning. It would be tragic if the National Presbyterian Church made the same mistakes which were made in the Presbyterian Church in the North. True brethren who have not felt led by the Lord to leave the PCUS should be treated with dignity and a loving beauty. There are two reasons for this: First, Jesus taught that the mark of the Christian is the observable love shown among all true believers. Second, by keeping the lines open to these men--not as a stratagem but as loving obedience to Christ's commands--the National Presbyterian Church will continue to offer a viable alternative.<sup>102</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The struggle for the purity and unity of the Presbyterian Church, United States (PCUS), from whom the PCA separated, centered on doctrinal laxity, mission drift and the resulting discord. These 20<sup>th</sup> century concerns were the same concerns of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Presbyterian forefathers. Through three hundred years of struggle for the purity and unity of the church, a foundation for the PCA was set. Decline had become

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The new board was composed of pastors and elders in sympathy to the new denomination but elected to stay in the PCUS to contend for the faith.

<sup>102</sup> Francis Schaeffer, "A Step Forward," *The Presbyterian Journal* 45 (March 6, 1974): 7-8.

the established standard, and a new denomination was the only way to preserve the purity and unity of the church.

The decline of the PCUS can be discerned from the actions of the General Assembly and various Presbyteries. In 1971, G. Aiken Taylor catalogued the problems of the previous ten years at the General Assembly. A sampling of the ten-year period preceding the formation of the PCA reveals the same problems of the earlier centuries within Presbyterianism: confessional integrity, the mission of the church and the sufficiency of the bible,

- Challenge to Confessional Integrity:
  - 1968 Assembly adopted a theological paper endorsing the "new morality" devoid of theological justification;
  - 1969 Assembly authorized a committee to draw up a new Confession of Faith. The Concerned Presbyterians were mildly, but formally, censured for their opposition to new theologies.
- Challenge to the Mission of the Church:
  - 1966 Assembly takes formal action to condemn the politically charged capital punishment;
  - 1970 Assembly formally favored abortion for economic reasons and asked for a study of torture in Brazil.
- Challenge to the Sufficiency of the Scripture:
  - 1962 Assembly was asked to improve future volumes of Layman's Bible Commentary but refused. Earlier, the commentary had been shown to say that much of the Old Testament consists of collections of folk tales;
  - 1964 Assembly formally enacted the ordination of women as elders and ministers.<sup>103</sup>

Contemporary Presbyterians have inherited a problem their forefathers have tried to solve since the 1720s and the earliest formation of the church in the American colonies. Maintaining the purity and unity of the church is exceptionally difficult and

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<sup>103</sup> G. Aiken Taylor, "How We Got Where We Are: Surveying Ten Years of Regress in the Presbyterian Church US," 4–5.  
[https://pcahistory.org/pca/50th/documents/Presbyterian%20Journal/TaylorGA\\_1971\\_Where.pdf](https://pcahistory.org/pca/50th/documents/Presbyterian%20Journal/TaylorGA_1971_Where.pdf).

when achieved is quickly dismantled. The PCA has existed for only half a century but is marked by serious controversies concerning doctrinal purity.

A survey of study committee reports highlights the reality of life in the PCA<sup>104</sup>:

- 1980: A study committee on the use of alcohol to resolve tensions over liberty of conscience.
- 1999: A study committee to resolve tensions over Genesis 1 and the days of creation.
- 2007: A study committee on the Federal Vision and New Perspective on Paul to resolve tensions on the nature of justification and confessional integrity.
- 2017: A study committee on the role of women in the church to resolve tensions over the work of the ministry.
- 2021: A study committee on human sexuality to resolve tensions on concupiscence and Side B Christianity.

Each of these, and many more, has contributed to the revelation that the PCA consists of leaders that share little in terms of how they define a healthy church. In turn, the PCA is, at present, sifting itself into two networks that reflect the same disagreements common to the questions of confessional and evangelical integrity of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the nature and mission of the church of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the sufficiency of the Word of God of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The same tensions between Old Side/School and New Side/School are again emerging in the PCA through the competing networks of the Gospel Reformation Network (Old) and the Alliance for Mission and Reform (New).<sup>105</sup>

As the denomination seeks to move forward in faithfulness to the vows all elders take to promote the peace, purity, unity and edification of the church, a healthy

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<sup>104</sup> Each of these study committee reports can be found at “PCA Historical Center,” accessed February 8, 2023, <https://www.pcahistory.org/pca/digest/index.html>. Digest, volumes 1 thru 4. These are merely representative. There are over forty such reports on a wide variety of subjects recorded in the Digest volumes 1-4.

<sup>105</sup> For the vision and values of the Gospel Reformation Network, see [www.gospelreformation.net](http://www.gospelreformation.net). For the vision and values of the Alliance for Mission and Renewal, see [www.a4mr.org](http://www.a4mr.org). Each was accessed on August 1, 2023.

remembrance of the historical crises that have shaped the PCA is a good place to go. However, we are also called to imitate our leaders. How did the men of those previous years labor to preserve Presbyterianism for future generations against the threat of schism, discord, and rapidly changing culture? The leader most often forgotten but most helpfully remembered is Jonathan Dickinson and his struggle for the purity and unity of the earliest American Presbyterian church. The experiences and pastoral approach of Dickinson's pursuit can serve as a roadmap for contemporary PCA ministers in the same pursuit.

## CHAPTER THREE

### JONATHAN DICKINSON AND THE COURSE OF THE COLONIAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

#### Introduction: The Need for Limits and the Need for Order

A thorough reading of Jonathan Dickinson reveals a noble effort: his absolute commitment to *both* the purity and unity of the church, because for him both were necessary if colonial Presbyterianism was to survive its infancy and be passed to future generations. Common opinion has long been that unity was a priority for him, and so it was.<sup>1</sup> However, Dickinson occupies a privileged position in Presbyterianism because of his equal commitment to the purity of the church. The immediate context of his ministry, both before and during the Great Awakening, was an acute sense of the need to define limits and defend order in the early American Presbyterian Church. A recovery is in order of Jonathan Dickinson's life and ministry in a way that will show that a careful use of steely conviction, theological depth, and intentional moderation in ecclesiastical affairs is not only possible, but a proven way of establishing a healthy church holding her purity and unity in tension. His works and ministry span the 1720s through the early 1740s and a discernable pattern is noted that suggests Jonathan Dickinson represents a life and ministry badly in need of retrieval for the good of the Presbyterian Church in America.

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<sup>1</sup> Leigh Eric Schmidt, "Jonathan Dickinson and the Making of the Moderate Awakening," *American Presbyterians* 63, no. 4 (Winter 1985): 341–353.

## The Development and Influences of Jonathan Dickinson

On April 22, 1688 Jonathan Dickinson was born in Hatfield, Massachusetts to Hezekiah and Abigail, both native New Englanders from upstanding families in the mid-1600s.<sup>2</sup> His paternal grandfather, Nathaniel Dickinson, had emigrated to the Connecticut River Valley around 1630 and became one of the region's most prominent and wealthiest citizens. Bryan Le Beau suggests that Nathaniel became embroiled in the region's dispute over the Half-Way Covenant, which may have prompted his move to Hadley, MA.<sup>3</sup> More importantly, the dispute, ironically also involving Nathaniel's opposition to Presbyterian polity, suggests that young Jonathan Dickinson was born to a long line of men and women deeply invested in ecclesiastical affairs. His own mother was the granddaughter of Stratford, Connecticut's first minister, Rev. Adam Blackman.<sup>4</sup>

Little is known of Dickinson's early years, other than the fact that he was the second of six children, and the first-born son of Hezekiah and Abigail.<sup>5</sup> It was common in that era for children to spend significant time each summer away from home, if at all possible. For Dickinson, that meant time in the care of his maternal grandparents in Stratford, CT, where, in God's kind providence, he met and was influenced by Stratford's

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account of Dickinson's life and timeline, see Edwin Francis Hatfield, *History of Elizabeth, New Jersey* (New York, NY: Carlton and Lanahan, 1868). 326-354 or Appendix A, attached.

<sup>3</sup> The Half-Way Covenant was a controversy surrounding partial church membership and the relationship of the children of unbelievers to the sacraments, beginning primarily in the New England congregational churches. Because of his stance on the matter, Jonathan Edwards was a major force in the dispute. For more, see Perry Miller, "The Half-Way Covenant," *The New England Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (1933): 676-715. Miller's telling of the Half-Way Covenant in New England is quite humorous in tone, even sarcastic. Nevertheless, he reminds us, if overstated, that the issue threatened to undo the entire social order of New England. This may contribute to the Dickinson family move from the Connecticut River Valley.

<sup>4</sup> Bryan F. LeBeau, *Jonathan Dickinson and the Formative Years of American Presbyterianism* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 6.

<sup>5</sup> Herbert L Samworth, "Those Astonishing Wonders of His Grace: Jonathan Dickinson and the Great Awakening" (Th.D Dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1988). 63.

minister, Rev. Israel Chauncy.<sup>6</sup> This may have been little more than a footnote in history except that Chauncy was also one of the principal founders of what became Yale College. The year it went into operation, 1702 under the name “School of the Church,” Dickinson enrolled, making him part of the original four-year class of Yale.<sup>7</sup> Years later, in 1747, Dickinson would become the first president of the College of New Jersey, now Princeton University.<sup>8</sup> His connection to the two premier institutions in the colonies set Jonathan Dickinson at the headwaters of American education.

While at Yale, Dickinson lived with Abraham Pierson, the president and primary instructor of the college, whose son John became an important ally for Dickinson in the later years of ecclesiastical distress. Though nothing exists that would give further insight, history suggests that either the elder Pierson or his tutor, John Hart, mentored Dickinson in both theology and medicine, for while Dickinson served as a minister, he also served as town doctor.<sup>9</sup>

Dickinson’s first theological mentor, however, was Daniel Hooker, the grandson of noted Puritan divine, Thomas Hooker. Though Daniel Hooker’s commitment to puritanism is unknown, his investment in Dickinson and employment at the Collegiate

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<sup>6</sup> Samworth, “Those Astonishing Wonders,” 63.

<sup>7</sup> Franklin Bowditch Dexter, *Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of Yale College with Annals of the College History, October, 1701-May, 1745* (New York, NY: Henry Hold and Company, 1885), 45.

<sup>8</sup> For a more on the historical development of the College of New Jersey see, Thomas J. Wertenberker, “The College of New Jersey and the Presbyterians.” *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society (1943-1961)* 36, no. 4 (1958): 209–16.

<sup>9</sup> In 1740, during the height of Presbyterian tensions which greatly occupied his time, Dickinson published, *Observations of That Terrible Disease Vulgarly Called the Throat Distemper with Advice as to the Method of Cure: In a Letter to a Friend* (Boston, MA: S. Kneeland and T. Green, 1740). Given the number of existing copies of this essay, it is safe to assume it received wide circulation.

School suggests he had inherited the faith of his family.<sup>10</sup> Further, Dickinson's theological perspective on covenant theology, as well as his puritan plain style preaching, was influenced by his studies of William Ames and William Perkins under Hooker's supervision.<sup>11</sup> Ames and Perkins advocated for a view of covenant theology that later became a staple of New England puritanism,

They did not deny the basic Calvinistic precepts of God's omnipotence, the depravity of man, and predestination, but they did suggest that God, after the fall, in his infinite mercy, freely consented to bind Himself to a covenant with man, offering salvation to those who entered into and abided by it. They argued that God established a covenant of grace with Abraham, in which salvation was promised in return for faith in the coming Christ, the mediator between God and man. Sealed by Christ's coming, his death and resurrection, man was thus redeemed from sin and preordained for salvation through the work of the Holy Spirit. Without denying predestination, Ames and Perkins asserted that the Holy Spirit would come to those who entered a covenant with God and led a sanctified life, thereby providing an incentive for introspection and personal spiritual testing. This was seized upon by the Puritans of New England, including Dickinson, when the demands of the older and more rigorous doctrines of predestination had all but been rejected.<sup>12</sup>

Dickinson graduated from Yale in 1706 and was ordained as a minister in the Congregational church in 1709, with almost nothing known about the years in between. There is one known, important event that took place in 1708, however. In that year he moved to Elizabethtown, New Jersey where he married (1709) Joanna Melyen, whose brother was the minister of the church that Jonathan would eventually pastor for almost

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel Hooker's name appears in neither Richard Webster nor Charles Briggs. See Richard Webster, *A History of the Presbyterian Church in America: From Its Origin until the Year 1760, with Biographical Sketches of Its Early Ministers* (Philadelphia, PA: Joseph M. Wilson, 1857) and Charles Augustus Briggs, *American Presbyterianism: Its Origin and Early History* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1885).

<sup>11</sup> See Samworth, "Those Astonishing Wonders," 64 and Le Beau, *Dickinson*, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Le Beau, *Dickinson*, 10. See also Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1965), 48-49 and George Marsden, *Religion and American Culture* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1990), 49.

forty years.<sup>13</sup> The circumstances of Jonathan Dickinson succeeding his brother-in-law have almost become the stuff of legend.

The story goes that on a particular Lord's Day in 1708, an overly sensitive Samuel Melyen invited the choir to choose the closing hymn. Whatever they chose, Melyen took it to be something of an attack on his ministry and prompted him to exit the church through the center aisle before the hymn was finished, never to be heard from again. The accuracy of the story cannot be known, but it does provide a parable for the long ministry of Jonathan Dickinson, a man seemingly unable to avoid serious conflict in the church and finding a way to bring health and peace out of the chaos.<sup>14</sup>

The charge given at Dickinson's ordination may reflect the declining spiritual conditions of puritan New England in the years preceding the Great Awakening. William T. Youngs argues that the changing opinion connected to society's view of clergy can be noted by the ordination ceremonies of Congregational ministers. Whereas in the mid-seventeenth century ordination called attention to the minister's place as both member and spiritual leader in a local society, a century later ordination tended to celebrate the minister's admission to a sacred, narrower community of professional clergy.<sup>15</sup> By the time Dickinson began his ministry, this idea of clericalism among New England Congregationalism came to be an obsession but was at odds with their heritage. Youngs proposes that the changing ordination sermons of the day may reflect a declining view of

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<sup>13</sup> It is likely that Joanna Melyen was a significant factor in attracting Dickinson to Elizabethtown. The two had almost certainly met on the occasions of Joanna's visits to her cousins, who lived very nearby in Guilford, Connecticut.

<sup>14</sup> For a fuller account of the story, see Le Beau, *Formative Years*, 6.

<sup>15</sup> J. William T. Youngs, "Congregational Clericalism: New England Ordinations before the Great Awakening," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (July 1974): 481.

the pastor's place in society, perhaps suggesting a declining spiritual life in the first half of the seventeenth century,

It suggested that in the years preceding the great awakening the ministers were no longer confident of their ability to command widespread public esteem.<sup>16</sup>

At his ordination, Dickinson was charged to maintain the purity of the Reformed faith, emphasizing the importance of the helpless estate of mankind after the fall, the total depravity of sin and the unmerited grace of Christ to redeem the elect. In that sermon, Joseph Morgan reminded Dickinson that above all things, he must never waiver from his God-given responsibility to draw unsaved men to faith in Christ through the regular preaching of the Word, which alone can save them. The congregation was, in turn, charged with honoring their new pastor in his spiritual endeavors and that to hinder him was to make them, “a murderer of souls, a fighter against God, and helper of the devil.”<sup>17</sup>

On September 17, 1717, Dickinson's name appears in the minutes of the newly constituted Synod of Philadelphia. He was the youngest minister on the rolls but was almost immediately recognized as a trustworthy leader. He had already taken part in several ordination services, both in the Synod and beyond, and by 1721 was elected moderator. He was just past his thirty-fourth birthday, making him one of the youngest

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<sup>16</sup> Youngs, “Congregational Clericalism,” 481.

<sup>17</sup> See Joseph Morgan, *The Great Concernment of Gospel Ordinances Manifested From the Great Effect of the Well Improving or Neglect of Them. Delivered in a Sermon at the Ordination of the Reverend Mr. Jonathan Dickinson, at Elizabeth Town, the 29<sup>th</sup> of September, 1709. By Joseph Morgan, a Minister of the Gospel*, accessed September 20, 2022. <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/n01325.0001.001>. Exactly twenty years later, Morgan would be forced from his church in Freehold, New Jersey for reasons that were consistent with his warning to Dickinson and the Elizabethtown congregation. He had left the church in a poor condition because of the treatment he received by the congregation. In 1730, a young John Tennent was sent to serve the church as interim while the Presbyterian authorities solidified a replacement for Morgan. He believed the congregation had been given over by God because of their abuses of the gospel and their previous minister. See Herbert L. Samworth, “Those Astonishing Wonders,” 6-7.

ministers to serve in that capacity in American Presbyterian history. Twenty-one years later he would serve again as moderator, this time as a member of the Synod of New York. He was such an effective and beloved churchman that he was elected yet a third time to moderate the 1745 Synod. To our knowledge, Dickinson remains the only man elected moderator of the highest Presbyterian court three times.

Dickinson was at the center of the two most combative controversies of colonial Presbyterianism: the subscription debates of the 1720s and the Great Awakening of the 1730s. His role in both will be discussed in detail below, but it should be noted that while his best theological output was in regard to the rising tide of the Enlightenment, he was at his best as a churchman in handling these two thorny issues. In 1729 he argued against requiring ministers to subscribe to the Westminster Standards, which put him at odds with a significant number of his fellow Presbyterians. When the Great Awakening swept through the middle colonies and eventually split the church, Dickinson took up the New Side cause, but only after a significant change of heart in 1739 after meeting George Whitfield. Though he chose a side in the conflicts, Dickinson labored for conciliation throughout.<sup>18</sup> In both these substantial conflicts, Dickinson found a way to stand his ground, offer a reasonable defense of his view and win the hearts and minds of warring parties within the church.

Jonathan Dickinson was a man of immense theological acumen. John Erskine once said of him, “the British Isles have produced no such writers on divinity in the eighteenth century as Dickinson and Edwards.”<sup>19</sup> That’s high praise, given the honorable position Jonathan Edwards enjoys in historical theology. For his contemporaries,

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<sup>18</sup> Schmidt, “Jonathan Dickinson and the Making of the Moderate Awakening,” 341–353.

<sup>19</sup> Hatfield, *History of Elizabeth*, 352.

Dickinson was Edwards' equal. Nevertheless, it was his moderation, combined with his theological gravitas, that was Dickinson's most important characteristic during the Presbyterian turbulence that defined most of his career. Presbyterians have been marked by two painful realities over the course of its entire history in the United States: 1) the threat of theological latitudinarianism, and 2) the danger of schism. It is his role as a concerned Presbyterian leader in the 1720s and 1730s that is most helpful for contemporary PCA elders to recover.

### **Debating the Need for Limits: Jonathan Dickinson and Confessional Subscription**

Charles Briggs makes the claim, rightfully, that, "Jonathan Dickinson became the great representative American Presbyterian of the Colonial Period, the symbol of all that was noble and generous in the Presbyterian Church."<sup>20</sup> To follow his ministry at the time, however, one might struggle to reach the same conclusion. His was a ministry characterized by warring parties on all sides. By the 1720s, Dickinson had established himself as a trusted young leader and viewed his role as something of a caretaker for the young sapling that was the Presbyterian church.

#### The Emigration Influence

Recent scholarship compellingly updates Leonard Trinterud's long-standing proposition that the American Presbyterian church was formed according to the coalescing of three traditions: Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, American Puritanism, and first-generation Irish immigrants loyal to their ethnic traditions of subscription and the revivals. The English Presbyterians had long been suspicious of subscription, a

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<sup>20</sup> Briggs, *American Presbyterianism*, 177.

disposition which helped form an ethnic community in New England opposed to subscription in the colonies. In the middle colonies, however, a burgeoning immigration pattern to Long Island and New Jersey helped Presbyterianism coalesce around two traditions there: New Englanders, with their anti-subscription orientation, and Ulster Scots with their tradition of full subscription. Le Beau suspects this may have been a significant factor in the Presbyterian discord that would follow. Speaking of American Presbyterianism, he says,

[It's] founding fathers represented the two dominant sources of the population that came to constitute the Presbyterian Church in the Middle Colonies: From New Englanders, concentrated in northern New Jersey and among whom Jonathan Dickinson would be prominent, came the tenets of English Puritanism, modified by the New England experience. From the Scots and Ulster Scots came the influence of Scottish Presbyterianism, modified in part by their experience in both the poverty and persecution of Northern Ireland.<sup>21</sup>

While not disputing it, Thomas Cornman refines Trinterud's supposition by paying greater attention to the differences between Irish and Scottish Presbyterian polity.<sup>22</sup> The Ulstermen were far less settled on the issue of subscription, for instance, while the Scots required full subscription from at least 1560.<sup>23</sup> This becomes interesting to us insofar as the debates surrounding American Presbyterian polity in the 1720s was influenced by the Ulstermen to a far greater extent than is commonly acknowledged.

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<sup>21</sup> Le Beau, *Dickinson* 14. See also Leonard J. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition: A Re-Examination of Colonial Presbyterianism* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1949), 14–16. Ligon Duncan helpfully points out the importance of understanding the Scots tradition of unqualified subscription as a fountain head for the Irish and American subscription debates. See Ligon Duncan, "Owning the Confession," in David W Hall, *The Practice of Confessional Subscription* (Oak Ridge, TN: Covenant Foundation, 2001), 77-78.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas H. L. Cornman, *Caterpillars and Newfangled Religion: The Struggle for the Soul of Colonial American Presbyterianism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc, 2003). 9-40. Elizabeth Nybakken gives helpful attention to the Irish influence in the Colonial period. See Elizabeth I. Nybakken, "New Light on the Old Side: Irish Influences on Colonial Presbyterianism," *The Journal of American History* 68, no. 4 (March 1982): 813–32.

<sup>23</sup> See Duncan, "Owning the Confession," 77-91.

Thomas Craighead's experience in Ireland was a major factor in the American caution about subscription, for instance. His brother, Robert, was the primary architect of the Irish *Pacificum*, which sought to allow Irish Presbyterians to take scruples with the Confession. When his plan was suspended, the non-subscribers were brought together as the Presbytery of Antrim and soon excised from the Synod of Ulster. Thomas Craighead brought the same idea to the colonies in the mid 1720's.<sup>24</sup> Dickinson was keenly aware of the Irish context, which helped shape his own arguments in the subscription debates.<sup>25</sup>

### The Irish Context

By the time Dickinson and the American Presbyterians were discovering the difficulties with the subscription debates, Irish Presbyterians were deep in the conflict. In Belfast, on July 28<sup>th</sup> 1720, Samuel Haliday was installed to serve the First Congregation of Belfast. At his installation, he did not answer any question directly related to subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith. Rather, he offered an amended version of the requirement,

I sincerely adopt the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be the only rule of revealed religion, a sufficient test of orthodoxy of soundness in the faith, and to settle all the terms of ministerial and Christian communion, to which nothing may be added by any synod, assembly, or council whatsoever. And I find all the essential Articles of the Christian doctrine to be contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith; which Articles I receive upon the sole authority of the Holy Scriptures.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas Craighead was one of the committee members to craft the 1729 Adopting Act compromise to the Synod of Philadelphia. In effect, it was his second attempt to forge a compromise on the matter of anti vs. full subscription. It is easy to see how the failure to do so in Ireland and the resulting schism would have been a major factor in his hopes for better way in the new world.

<sup>25</sup> See Cornman, *Caterpillars*. 9-40.

<sup>26</sup> Samuel Haliday, *Reasons Against the Imposition of Subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith; or, Any Such Human Tests for Orthodoxy; Together with Answers to the Arguments for such Impositions*. (Belfast, 1726). Quoted also in Charles Scott Sealy, "Church Authority and Non-Subscription in Early 18<sup>th</sup> Century Presbyterianism," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Glasgow 2010), 139.

Haliday's modified subscription was found to be consistent with the recently adopted *Pacificum*, or Pacific Act of 1720 because the Act was designed to be a compromise between subscribers to the confession and non-subscribers.<sup>27</sup> The difference between the two parties was hardly as settled as Haliday's installation offering may sound.

Haliday's installation, given the prominent role his church enjoyed, was the first test of how the Pacific Act might advance either unity or division. Certainly, by design and even by its very name, the Act was promoted as a peaceful way forward between the two sides of the Irish Presbyterian body. The presbytery of Belfast formally accepted Haliday's alternative confession, which prompted a small group of five ministers to file a protest, charging that the Pacific Act had been violated by Belfast and demanded the matter be referred to Synod.

The Irish Presbyterians were beginning to feel the strain of the subscription debates. However, it must be noted that the debates ultimately may have had less to do with the question of subscription and more to do fundamentally with the question of ecclesiastical authority. Charles Sealy summarizes,

[The Presbytery of Belfast] reasoned that there was no limit to the number of phrases one could scruple, 'this [the Presbytery] thought might be fairly construed in such a latitude as to admit intrants' who should scruple an invariable form of words, provided they by their own expressions, confessed the same doctrines.' Moreover, the phrase in the Pacific Act, 'as

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<sup>27</sup> In 1724 suspension of the *Pacificum* further complicated the matter of European subscription for both parties of the colonial debate. For further reading on the adoption then suspension of the *Pacificum*, see Le Beau, *Dickinson*, 32-34. Webster records, "In 1725 the Irish Synod resolved to suspend from the ministry all who reproached the church judicatories for requiring subscription and that whosoever shall maintain that Christ has not lodged in the authority in the judicatories of this church but that they are mere consultative meetings whose decisions even in matters of prudence and expediency may be counteracted and defeated by every man's private judgment ought not to be allowed to vote in any matter the decision whereof may affect any member who believes the proper authority of our adjudicators as the ordinance of Jesus Christ to which submission is due in all things lawful for conscience." Richard Webster, *A History of the Presbyterian Church in America*, 125.

now is practiced by the Presbyteries, was included with full knowledge that some admitted that a favorable interpretation of the substance of doctrine.’ They therefore ‘understood not the substance of every particular proposition...but the substance of the doctrine of the Confession considered as a system. While the Presbytery offered these reasons for their interpretation, more substantially, and what was an underlying issue throughout the controversy was the question of the authority of the presbytery in relation to the higher Church courts. Their third reason was that it was the Presbyteries that were given the authority to judge whether candidates were ‘sound in the faith, and that his expressions are consistent with the substance of the doctrine.’ Since the Synod had given no clear definition [when it adopted the Pacific Act] of the ‘substance of doctrine’ the presbytery of Belfast argued that the right of this judgement had been retained by the Presbytery.<sup>28</sup>

At the 1721 Synod, the Haliday affair was hardly settled. Almost immediately, once the roll was taken, the Presbytery of Belfast was accused of violating the Pacific Act because 1) they claimed authority over admission, and 2) they interpreted the Pacific Act in terms of subscribing to the substance of the doctrines of the Westminster Confession of Faith over a stricter subscription to the Confession itself. To support their cause, the Presbytery of Belfast pointed to the following phrase of the Pacific Act,

If any person called to subscribe shall scruple any phrase or phrases in the Confession, he shall have leave to use his own expression, which the presbytery shall accept of, provided they judge such a person sound in the faith: the explanation shall be entered on the presbytery-book.<sup>29</sup>

### The Burgeoning Problem in America

The questions of subscription and ecclesiastical authority quickly made their way into the American context by way of the young Synod of Philadelphia, especially through a declaration by George Gillespie that opened the door for Synod to act authoritatively in any matter of its choosing. Gillespie proposed changes to the government and discipline

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<sup>28</sup> Sealy, “Church Authority and Non-Subscription,” 139-140.

<sup>29</sup> Webster, *A History of the Presbyterian Church in America*, 99.

within the Presbyterian communion following a series of moral and doctrinal scandals within its ranks. Dickinson feared Synod might use that authority unilaterally eventually to require full subscription, which he opposed and feared. In 1721, the same year of the Haliday affair, Jonathan Dickinson was chosen moderator of the Synod of Philadelphia. The turmoil gripping the Irish Presbyterians was on the mind of all in Philadelphia, and Dickinson sensed the questions of synodical authority as it relates to subscription threatened the very fragile Synod.

Gillespie's declaration, which was adopted, read, in part,

Our opinion is, that if any brother have any overture to offer to be formed into an act of synod, for the better carrying on in the matters of our government and discipline, he may bring it in against the next synod.<sup>30</sup>

Dickinson, being of the Haliday school of thought on the matter, rejected the proposal outright and entered a protest.<sup>31</sup> This may be something of an unusual move for the moderator of the synod, but it highlights the firm resolve native to Dickinson that was soon to appear before synod, especially as it related to ministerial unity among men who were theologically aligned but differed in ecclesiastical priorities.

The following year, as is customary in the Presbyterian church, Dickinson preached the opening sermon of synod. He preached on 2 Timothy 3:17, "<sup>16</sup>All Scripture

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<sup>30</sup> *Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1706-1788* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Education and Sabbath-School Work, 1904), 68. See also, Webster, *A History of the Presbyterian Church in America*, 99.

<sup>31</sup> A significant issue agitating Gillespie was the apparent allowance of moral scandal within the ranks of Synod. Motivated by this concern, Gillespie made his motion as a way of tightening synodical control. Dickinson's protest was not aimed at lightening standards of moral conduct but with loosening Synod's power to create an *act* that could bind the conscience of ministers in different presbyteries, "it seemed they were fearful that the formation of this overture into law of the Synod would give this Synod extraordinary power to enforce its laws against the consciences of its members. This in turn would allow the synod to enforce stricter subscription to the Westminster confession of faith as a term of ministerial communion." See Samworth, "Those Astonishing Wonders," 72.

*is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*” He focused especially on verse 17, arguing that God has thoroughly equipped his church for every good work by the power of His sacred Word, and that no man-made confession has a rightful place in the examination of ministers. He also argued that the synod had no power to legislate otherwise because he was jealous to preserve the rights of Presbyteries,

But to make this case a little plainer: Though some plain and comprehensive creed or confession of faith...may be useful and necessary, since the worst of heresies may take shelter under the express words of scripture. Yet we are by no means to force these credenda, upon any of differing sentiments. We may not so much as shut out of communion any such dissenters, as we can charitably hope Christ won't shut out of heaven: But should open the doors of the church as wide, as Christ opens the gates of heaven; and receive one another as Christ also received us, to the glory of God. And though we ought to reject both the heresy and communion of those who deny what we esteem the fundamental truths of our holy religion, yet even these essential Articles of Christianity, may not be imposed by civil coercions, temporal penalties, or any other way whatsoever.<sup>32</sup>

As he had hoped, Dickinson's sermon was received as reasonable, firm, gracious and under conviction that synod had no legislative authority, but was advisory in nature, and that subscription to the confession offered no assurances of true orthodoxy or purity of doctrine, and therefore could be no predictor of faithful ministry.<sup>33</sup> Dickinson pointed out that a church judicatory retains the right to try ministers in cases of moral scandal or violating the scriptures, but he rejected the notion that churches may do so if ministers

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<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Dickinson, *A Sermon, Preached at the Opening of the Synod at Philadelphia, September 19, 1722. Wherein [Sic] Is Considered the Character of the Man of God, and His Furniture for the Exercise Both of Doctrine and Discipline, with the True Boundaries of the Churches Power. / By Jonathan Dickinson, A.M. Minister of the Gospel at Elizabeth-Town*, accessed April 3, 2023. <https://ota.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/repository/xmlui/bitstream/handle/20.500.12024/N02044/N02044.html?sequence=5&isAllowed=y>.

<sup>33</sup> Bryan F. LeBeau, “The Subscription Controversy and Jonathan Dickinson,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 54, no. 3 (Fall 1976): 321–323.

violate what a court considers ecclesiastical regulations. Though Keith Hardman offers an uncharitable critique of the sermon, it was nevertheless a faithful representation of Dickinson's viewpoint on the matter, and a fair exegesis of the text.<sup>34</sup> Hardman argues that there must have been a significant contingent of Scotch-Irish Presbyterians dismayed at the sermon. Though the Scotch-Irish held to a pro-legislative nature of Synod, and passed that down to future Southern Presbyterians, Hardman offers pure speculation and likely reveals his own bias, as the minutes from the rest of the synod suggest nothing of the sort.

Later in the same assembly, a remarkable event unfolded under Dickinson's leadership, which event further illustrates his irenic approach to the tensions of a divided assembly. Recall that in 1721 Dickinson joined four others in filing a protest against Gillespie's overture giving synod legislative authority to issue an *Act*. At the 1722 synod, Dickinson expressed a willingness to back off from his protest under certain circumstances. He offered a compromise consisting of four main points, together known as *The Pacificatory*,

1. We freely grant, that there is full executive power of church government in Presbyteries and Synods, and that they may authoritatively, in the name of Christ, use the keys of church discipline to all proper intents and purposes, and that the keys of the church are committed to the church officers and them only.
2. We also grant, that the mere circumstantial of church discipline, such as the time, place, and mode, of carrying on in the government of the Church, belong to ecclesiastical judicatories to determine as occasions occur, conformable to the general rules in the word of God, that require all things to be done decently and in order. And if these things are called acts, we will take no offence at the word, provided that these acts be not imposed upon such as conscientiously dissent from them.
3. We also grant, that Synods may compose directories and recommend them to all their members, respecting all the parts of discipline, provided

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<sup>34</sup> Keith Jordan Hardman, "Jonathan Dickinson and the Course of American Presbyterianism, 1717-1747" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1971), 44-47.

that all subordinate judicatories may decline from such directories when they conscientiously think they have just reason so to do.

4. We freely allow that appeals may be made from all inferior to superior judicatories, and that superior judicatories have authority to consider and determine such appeals.<sup>35</sup>

The synod responded with a unanimous vote to approve, and Dickinson withdrew his protest. Dickinson had successfully navigated through potentially divisive waters with a winsome, conciliatory spirit, greatly influenced the assembly and made for a healthier church. He compromised without either giving up his own central conviction or requiring his opponents to do so. His *Pacificatory* effectively granted that Synod does maintain some measure of judicial or legislative authority, particularly when deciding on matters of appeal. But the *Pacificatory* also maintained that the power of Synod is limited and delegated and cannot make laws that bind the conscience.<sup>36</sup> Both sides got a desired outcome. The Gillespie party got better assurances of the Synodical power to bring disciplinary actions against the morally scandalous, while the Dickinson party got a way of handling such matters without violating the consciences of others in the Presbyteries.<sup>37</sup>

Synod recognized the achievement and the growing sense of unity in that moment. It was a fragile unity, one long sought. But it was unity, nonetheless,

The Synod was so universally pleased with the above said composure of their difference, that they unanimously joined together in a thanksgiving prayer, and joyful singing the one hundred and thirty-third psalm.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1706-1788*, 74.

<sup>36</sup> One may hear the faint echoes of Dickinson's *Pacificatory* (3) in the PCA's Book of Church Order, Preliminary Principle 7, "All church power, whether exercised by the body in general, or by representation, is only ministerial and declarative since the holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice. No church judicatory may make laws to bind the conscience."

<sup>37</sup> Samworth outlines the various opinions on Dickinson's protest, from Ashbel Green's assertion that Dickinson erred by carrying the Synod away from true Presbyterianism to Charles Hodge's appreciation for Dickinson's attempt at maintain the heart of grass-roots Presbyterianism. For more, see Samworth, "Those Astonishing Wonders," 76-77.

<sup>38</sup> *Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1706-1788*, 74.

Dating to 1706, the earliest extant minutes of American Presbyterianism, it is the first record of synod singing this psalm. To this day, when the Presbyterian Church in America concludes its annual General Assembly, the men rise and sing Psalm 133, recalling, perhaps unwittingly, the place of Jonathan Dickinson's moderation each year.

### A Thin Unity

Experienced has taught Presbyterians that debated issues rarely disappear after a single vote. By 1729, the issue of subscription and church authority came to the fore again, this time through the infamous Adopting Act. The issue had been slowly fomenting for most of the decade and would help give shape to the years ahead. Thomas Cornman paints a helpful, if undervalued, portrait of the growing disunity surrounding the issue of subscription. There were two primary groups within American Presbyterianism, each with its own epistemology that shaped its view of confessional subscription. For the confessionalist party, the way to advance a unique Presbyterian church in the colonies was through strict subscription of all ministers and probationers. The confessionalists believed strict subscription was also the most effective tool for securing unity within the church,

They believed that outward conformity to publicly stated doctrine would produce unity, even as ethnic and philosophical diversity increased. The confessionalist hoped that they would protect the church from extremes represented by the rationalists and evangelicals, both of whom threatened to tear the church apart and destroy the uniqueness of the Presbyterian tradition.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Cornman, *Caterpillars*, 16-17. Cornman argues that there was a third, smaller group that was quickly dismantled and eliminated from the Presbyterian communion by the larger two. The lines of demarcation were, by and large, the same lines along which the Colonial Presbyterian church would split in 1739/40. Dickinson would have been considered an evangelical, rather than a confessionalist, in his day, as he was one of the ministers that had migrated out of New England to the middle colonies and left Congregationalism to join the Presbyterian cause.

For the evangelical party, purity and unity could not be achieved by the simple act of subscription to the confession, for anyone could say anything at all to his ordaining body, regardless of true belief. The evangelical party placed far greater emphasis on the minister's testimony of grace and his piety,

Maintaining the spirit of Calvinism, they looked for grace's effects in an individual, rather than relying on an individual's public agreement with a confessional statement. Warm hearted piety was more important than confessional orthodoxy.<sup>40</sup>

Once again, although he did not resolve the matter, Jonathan Dickinson played a conciliatory role in leading the church through the difficulty. The tensions between the confessionalists and the evangelicals had been brewing and only grown stronger.

Five years earlier, in 1724, the New Castle Presbytery required candidates for the gospel ministry to own the Westminster Confession of Faith as the confession of their personal faith. The first instance of an American Presbyterian being required to subscribe occurred at the licensing of William McMillan.<sup>41</sup> The leader of the presbytery, John Thomson, who would later become the leading advocate for the Old Side, argued convincingly that because there was no seminary within the bounds of synod, requiring full subscription to the Confession was a safeguard against introducing doctrinal impurity, even if by accident. Dickinson had argued the exact opposite in his 1722 sermon at Synod. Each party was gaining sympathizers and the question of Presbyterian unity hung in the balance. Thomson went further than Dickinson was willing to go and recommended that synod make an act requiring adoption, and that all Presbyteries do the same.

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<sup>40</sup> Cornman, *Caterpillars*, 17.

<sup>41</sup> Samworth, "Those Astonishing Wonders," 78. See also Trinterud, *Forming an American Tradition*, 44.

Finally in 1729, the matter was brought to the synod for discussion and debate. The matter was quickly passed to a committee of opposing opinions with the hopes that a compromise could be reached. Famously, the Adopting Act took place over the course of a full day, creating both a ‘morning minute’ and an ‘afternoon minute.’ The morning minutes read all ministers within the bounds of Synod shall,

Declare their agreement in an approbation of the confession of faith with the larger and shorter catechisms of the assembly of divines at Westminster, as being in all the essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine; and do also adopt the said confession and catechisms as the confession of our faith. And we do also agree that all the Presbyteries within our bounds shall always take care not to admit any candidate of the ministry into the exercise of the sacred function, but what declares his agreement in opinion with all the essential and necessary articles of said confession either by subscribing the said confession of faith and catechisms or by a verbal declaration of their assent thereto, as such minister or candidate shall think best. And in case any minister of this , Synod, or any candidate for the ministry, shall have any scruple with respect to any article or articles of said Confession or Catechisms, he shall at the time of his making said declaration declare his sentiments to the Presbytery or Synod, who shall, notwithstanding, admit him to the exercise of the ministry within our bounds, and to ministerial communion, if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge his scruple or mistake to be only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship, or government.<sup>42</sup>

Earlier that day, Synod had declared that they did not claim the right to impose their faith on other men’s consciences and that they did not view themselves as possessing any legislative power or authority in the church. Rather, they declared their willingness to,

Receive one another as Christ has received us to the glory of God, and admit to fellowship in sacred ordinances, all such as we have grounds to believe Christ will at last admit to the kingdom of heaven, yet we are undoubtedly

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<sup>42</sup> *Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1706-1788*, 94. For the full record of the September 19, 1729 work of the Synod, see Appendix B.

obliged to take care that the faith once delivered to the saints be kept pure and uncorrupt among us, and so handed down to our posterity.<sup>43</sup>

In the infant Presbyterian church, Dickinson placed high value on the ministers' honesty to hold and teach what they believed, namely the Westminster Confession of Faith. His emphasis was on the purity of the church, as may be observed by his phrase, "take care that the faith...be kept pure and uncorrupt." Still, at that time of Presbyterian infancy, he saw a danger in requiring them to subscribe formally because he sensed doing so brought the Synod dangerously close to exercising legislative power. He had imported the most treasured aspects of his *Pacifactory* and his most relevant points from his 1722 sermon before the Synod into the debates over the Adopting Act and, in turn, helped lead the young Presbyterian communion to a happy compromise of warring parties,

[John] Thomson got his formal adoption of the Confession (Scottish confessional influence, Dickinson got his declaration of not imposing faith on other men's consciences (English non-subscribers influence), Craighead got the scruples principle (Irish Pacific Act influence).<sup>44</sup>

The afternoon session, in turn, called upon each minister present to state his individual scruples while maintaining the essential and necessary articles of the faith. Historians have never agreed on how the infant Presbyterian church understood the two minutes in relation to each other and the likelihood of Presbyterian unity on the matter was sharply tested the following year. Our purpose, however, is to note why Jonathan Dickinson was opposed to any subscription at all, though in the end he voted in favor of it. He had two reasons, both of which conjoined to his presupposition that the role of synod was advisory in nature, and yet obliged to maintain the purity of the church.

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<sup>43</sup>*Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1706-1788*, 94.

<sup>44</sup> S. Donald Fortson, *Presbyterian Creed: A Confessional Tradition in America, 1729-1870*, Studies in Christian History and Thought (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 10, footnote 30.

First, Dickinson's epistemology did not allow him to support subscription. He did not believe that the Confession should represent spiritual authority for the common believer, much less for the minister. Instead, he believed in a rational or reasonable faith that he developed after John Locke. For Dickinson the credibility of the Christian religion could and should be demonstrated by rational considerations and settled on the Scriptures alone. He believed the truths of Christianity are best evidenced by reason and piety, not by confessional subscription. Practically, for Dickinson that meant a sufficient examination for candidates for the gospel ministry should center not on subscription, but on examination of spiritual knowledge, personal piety and faithful labors. Charles Briggs summarizes both Dickinson's approach and the fallout with John Thomson:

Dickinson proposes instead of subscription 1) strict examination of candidates, 2) strict discipline in the church, especially with reference to scandalous ministers, 3) that the ministers of the gospel be most diligent, faithful and painful in the discharge of their awful trust. Thus the two great champions of subscription and of liberty came into open conflict.<sup>45</sup>

Here, Dickinson may be criticized insofar as one of his three criteria for gospel ministers was, "strict discipline...with reference to scandalous ministers." In 1720, Dickinson favored only a four-week suspension for Robert Cross, a notorious minister from the New Castle Presbytery who had been convicted of sexual sin by ecclesiastical trial.<sup>46</sup> Four weeks suspension for fornication is hardly strict discipline in the church against scandalous ministers.

The second reason Dickinson was opposed to subscription was because he viewed himself as an heir of the earliest American Presbyterians, with a primary focus and aim on unity among the brethren, especially the ministers. He believed the purity of the

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<sup>45</sup> Briggs, *American Presbyterianism*, 213.

<sup>46</sup> Samworth, "Those Astonishing Wonders," 71.

church could be guarded by thorough theological examination of a candidate. During the 1720s, he had little patience for disputed confessional points. He believed all reasonable ministers may have scruples and minor exception to the language of the Confession and was even willing to adopt the Confession as the confession of the Presbyterian Church in the colonies. But he also saw the disrupting power of regulating synods or Presbyteries to require entrants to subscribe. His firm grasp of church history helped his argument as he reminded his opponents not only of the more immediate ineffectiveness of the Pacific Act, but also how corruption entered the church in the wake of the Council of Nicaea,

The Synod of Nice did indeed impose subscriptions; but what was the consequence but horrible schisms, convulsions and confusions, until the church was crumbled into parts and parties, each uncharitably anathematizing one another. Never was the church infested with such a swarm of heretics and heresies, as sprung from that corrupt fountain of imposition and subscription. The Arians were not only strengthened in their heresy, and increased in their numbers by their persecution; but there was quickly added to them the black catalog of Eusthathians, Macedonians, Anomoioi, Eunomians, Luciferists, Anthropomorphites, Donatists, Appollonarians...Eutychians...with a long and almost endless etcetera. All which heresies rose out of the bottomless pit, in about seventy years space in the same church. Whence one council was convened after another to draw up new creeds and impose new subscriptions...this was the mark set by providence upon the first subscription of this kind, that was never imposed in the world, and this the defense of propagation of Truth that followed from it.<sup>47</sup>

He was deeply jealous for the purity and unity of the church in his own time, especially in the 1720s when the Presbyterian church was young, impressionable and, he sensed, fragile. The trail of schism that followed imposed subscription from the time of Christ helped inform his non-subscription conviction. Samworth notes the contemporary

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<sup>47</sup> Jonathan Dickinson, *Remarks Upon a Discourse Entitled An Overture presented to the Reverend Synod of Dissenting Ministers sitting in Philadelphia, in the month of September, 1728. In a letter to the Author. By a member of the Said Synod.* (1729), 4-8. <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-id?c=evans;idno=N02663.0001.001>.

matters in England, Scotland, and Ireland that clearly informed Dickinson's stance. The Presbyterian churches in all three of those countries had experienced trials and schisms over heterodoxy. In Scotland, in particular, a professor of theology was accused of teaching doctrines contrary to the faith, and the assembly found him guilty only of using words contrary to the Confession, but also affirmed their belief that he was mostly orthodox. The Presbyterian churches, Ireland, England and Scotland enforced strict subscription to combat error and preserve the purity of their churches, "so it came as no surprise that strict subscription was considered by many to be the solution for the difficulties of the colonial church."<sup>48</sup>

Two flaws may be observed in Dickinson's non-subscription stance, admittedly with the help of almost three hundred years of hindsight. First, he failed to appreciate the role subscription could play in a case of church discipline. If a minister was accused of heresy or had a significant change in his theological views, without necessarily violating a scriptural doctrine, full subscription, or even good faith subscription, would have made corrective discipline far easier by giving the church court an authoritative and objective voice in the matter. Dickinson would learn this the hard way only six years later in the Hemphill affair.

Second, Dickinson failed to account for the growth of the Presbyterian church. It was one thing to maintain careful oversight of a minister's doctrine when there were close, intimate relationships between the men. But as the church grew and became geographically scattered, maintaining tight accountability became almost impossible.

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<sup>48</sup> Samworth, "Those Astonishing Wonders," 69-70.

Requiring the men to subscribe to the Confession provided another layer of theological control in the context of a dispersed church.

On September 19, 1729, the Adopting Act was unanimously approved by the Synod of Philadelphia. Dickinson was present, which means he voted in favor. Once again, as arguably the most important Presbyterian of his era, Dickinson voiced his opposition, argued vigorously for his viewpoint from a biblical, theological, and historical perspective in a way that nurtured the young Presbyterian body. While flaws in his rationale may be detectable, Dickinson was successful in building a bridge between warring parties of a fracturing Presbyterian body. He had a unique ability to see the greater good that may be achieved when brothers debate according to their conviction and leave the outcome to the Lord. Briggs commends Dickinson for what appeared in the aftermath of the Adopting controversy,

The strong subscriptionists were Thomson and Anderson. The anti-subscriptionists were Dickinson and Pierson. The intermediate men were Andrews and John Budd...and Craighead...The extreme men were...forced to compromise or separate. The result was unanimity. It is said that Dickinson so shaped the Adopting Act as to make it satisfactory to all parties. As he was the author of the Pacificatory articles of 1722, so now he was chiefly instrumental in the Adopting Act of 1729. Dickinson was the ablest man in the American Presbyterian Church in the colonial period. It is due chiefly to him that the Church became an American Presbyterian Church, and that it was not split into fragments representing and perpetuating the differences of Presbyterians in the mother countries of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, and the several parishes in those countries.<sup>49</sup>

### **Debating the Need for Order: Jonathan Dickinson and the Great Awakening**

If Dickinson prevailed in the subscription controversy in the 1720s in keeping the infant church from splintering, he was sadly unable to do so in the 1730s. It was a decade

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<sup>49</sup> Briggs, *American Presbyterianism*, 216.

of encroaching *Corinthianism*: a party spirit that could only end in a split. Nevertheless, for all his skill on display in the 1720s, Jonathan Dickinson was at his best in the 1730s.

The two main issues Dickinson faced in the second full decade of his ministry surrounded the philosophical underpinnings of the Christian faith, and the arrival of the Great Awakening. Put differently, like his friend Jonathan Edwards, Jonathan Dickinson was forced to navigate the two competing influences of the 18<sup>th</sup> century: The rise of The Enlightenment and the spiritual awakening of an entire people. Given the importance of the Enlightenment to American culture immediately before the Great Awakening, it is important to note how Dickinson responded.

#### Strengthening the Church

In 1732 Dickinson published his seminal work, *The Reasonableness of Christianity, in Four Sermons. Wherein the Being and Attributes of God, the Apostacy of Man and the Credibility of Religion are Demonstrated by Rational Considerations*. The purpose of its writing is clear from the title itself and this work is crucial for understanding Dickinson's methodology as it relates to his convictions on the purity and unity of the church. Dickinson wanted to address the question of faith in Christ as revealed in the Scriptures against the deism of Locke, who had previously published his now famous essay of the same title. Dickinson, while irenic and moderate in nature, was unafraid and eager to marshal his considerable gifting in an effort to give suddenly wavering Christians a philosophically impeccable defense of the gospel against the ecclesiastically corrosive appeal of deism and Enlightenment ideas,

Dickinson and Edwards stood at the crossroads of Puritanism and the Enlightenment. In appropriating certain ideas of the Enlightenment, they sought the middle ground between the two threats of Arminianism and Antinomianism. Dickinson's *Reasonableness of Christianity* provided not

only the author's critique of the Enlightenment but also a moderate Calvinist theologian's attempt to appropriate and temper enlightenment ideas, thereby signifying his tacit endorsement of Enlightenment rationalism.<sup>50</sup>

There is nothing in Dickinson's writings that would suggest he was a 'moderate Calvinist' as Bryan Le Beau suggests. Nevertheless, Le Beau helps us understand the purpose and approach of Dickinson's *Reasonableness of Christianity*.<sup>51</sup> In these sermons, Dickinson broke from his New Side style of experiential preaching and instead gave his people a highly stylized rationale for the Christian faith.

The first of the four sermons comprising *Reasonableness* centered on Romans 1:20, "For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse." In his review of the work as a whole, Dickinson's good friend, Thomas Foxcroft, warned future readers that to engage with *The Reasonableness of Christianity* would require them to summon their thinking powers to a vigorous attention and call upon their most devout reflections because the seriousness of the themes in the sermons demand it. This is most evidently true in the first sermon called, "A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God."<sup>52</sup>

Dickinson sought to comfort the hearts and souls of his people by buffeting them against their perceived threat of scientific discovery as it relates to biblical revelation. This first sermon achieved his goal primarily by referring to a cosmological apologetic.

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<sup>50</sup> Le Beau, *Dickinson*, 88.

<sup>51</sup> See Gary Stewart, "The Calvinistic Soteriology of Jonathan Dickinson" *The Confessional Presbyterian* 7 (2011): 77-86.

<sup>52</sup> Jonathan Dickinson, *Reasonableness of Christianity, in Four Sermons. Wherein the Being And.* ([n.p.]: Gale Ecco, Print Editions, 2010), Preface, v.

He wanted to offer rational evidence of the truths of Christianity, so he pointed them first to the certainty of God by highlighting cause and effect.

It further appears from the things which are made that the first Cause of all things must be an Infinite Being. The prodigious magnitude and amazing extent of the universe do loudly proclaim the Infinite nature of its glorious author. Though we can have but an imperfect view of this scene of wonders, we may yet gaze our selves into admiration and surprise, by what obscure and distant glances are capable of...but having thus long gazed at the prodigious masses of these heavenly bodies, and the immeasurable space possessed by them, it's time to apply these considerations to the present purpose, and see if we can't discover the infiniteness of the Creator, from this of the heavenly regions. Which, if we will but open our eyes, must appear in the clearest light.<sup>53</sup>

Having assumed his listeners were compelled by the infinitude of God and that this infinite God, who made the universe, also made man and possesses a claim on him, Dickinson then took them to their reasonable and only response, namely, to worship and depend on God for their lives and happiness.

In what is typical puritan plain-style preaching, Dickinson wanted to improve the doctrine of God by encouraging his congregation to take advantage of the blessings that He offers them, especially if they were convinced of God's self-existence, perfections and gracious disposition. Though he wanted to provide a reasonable defense of the Christian faith, he did not want his hearers to get lost in the philosophical elements of his sermon. He even went out of his way to acknowledge that some of what he had said might be out of their intellectual reach, so he brought his sermon down to the level of his hearers, wanting them to be stirred toward religious exercise. He wanted to move his hearers to greater prayer, gratitude, and affections,

From what has been said it further appears that we should not only manifest our dependence upon God by praying to Him, but our gratitude by

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<sup>53</sup> Dickinson, *Reasonableness*, 17-21.

thanksgiving and praise. That gratitude is a natural debt to a benefactor, and that our thanksgivings should be proportioned to the benefits received, are truths everywhere acknowledged. How then should our hearts and mouths be forever filled with praises to the infinite fountain of goodness, from whence so many streams of mercy are continually flowing to us, and from whom we are continually receiving such a variety and affluence of what is fit for our use, comfort, support, ornament and delight. Besides the wonders of Redeeming love, and the mercies which refer to another life (which I hope to have further occasion to consider) the good things of this world only, which we all enjoy, give us cause to rouse up our grateful resentments, in that language of Psalm 103:1,2, ‘Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy Name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits.’<sup>54</sup>

In the second sermon, Dickinson turned to Romans 5:6, “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.” Here the preacher brought his congregation to their reasonable senses that if God is infinite and worthy of adoration, He is therefore holy. Thus, man is not only dependent on God and subject to Him, but man by nature and definition is unholy and at enmity with God. Dickinson’s classical Calvinism may be noted in this sermon.

The fallen apostate state of mankind, Christ died for the UNGODLY, ie, for such as were in an estate of distance from God, of enmity and opposition to Him. The text indeed gives us no light into the cause of this guilt and woe; but reason as well as revelation plainly dictates that it is inconsistent with the merciful nature of our glorious Creator and natural Lord, either to create us in an estate of sin and misery; or to reduce us to those wretched circumstances without just provocation. And therefore that rebellious and apostacy must necessarily be the source of this corruption and pollution. (emphasis original)<sup>55</sup>

Consistent with classical reformed or Calvinistic soteriology, the rest of the sermon explored the ideas of man’s rebellion against God as a consequence of his total depravity, as an act of cosmic treason, and thus deserving His hot wrath and displeasure.

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<sup>54</sup> Dickinson, *Reasonableness*, 34-35.

<sup>55</sup> Dickinson, *Reasonableness*, 38.

A detectable frustration, perhaps even dare to the deist of his day, comes through in this sermon. Though history remembers him as a moderate, Dickinson was not one to back down from a theological fight,

It's certain that we are naturally helpless and without strength or skill to recover our selves out of this plunge. We see ourselves in the pit, but can't find the way out by our own power or wisdom. We have lamentable experience, that our nature is polluted and all our faculties depraved, that our passions rebel against our reason, and that we are continually sinning against God, and provoking Him to anger. But which way shall we conquer our lusts, regulate our affections and get reconciled to God? Here reason is non-plus'd, and our best rational enquiries fruitless and in vain. Here let the Deist try his skill: Let him without the assistance of revelation draw up a perfect system of the laws of nature. Let him consult the means of restoring our lost innocency and of keeping our affections and passions...Let him call in the help of all the philosophers of Greece and Rome for his assistance in this arduous undertaking. And in the conclusion he'll have but his labour for his pains and continue in the same inextricable labyrinth.<sup>56</sup>

Dickinson's aim in *Reasonableness of Christianity* was not vague. He wanted to buffet the church against the encroaching Deism of Enlightenment America. He knew the stability of the young Presbyterian church was threatened by doctrinal impurity and philosophically persuasive arguments coming from rising stars within American society, like John Locke.

In the third and fourth sermons, Dickinson turned to the Scripture itself to give rational proof of its veracity, clearly intending for the final two sermons to be tied together.

Sermon three was from Luke 24:44, “<sup>44</sup> Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled,” called, “A

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<sup>56</sup> Dickinson, *Reasonableness*, 53-54.

Demonstration of the Christian Religion from the Prophecies of the Old Testament.”

This was the widest ranging sermon of the four, in which his topics meandered and at times appear to be held loosely together. He argued that Christianity should be believed because of the reliability of the bible, with particular interest on Old Testament prophecies having been fulfilled in Christ show that He is the Messiah. Old Testament prophecy may be fulfilled in any number of ways, but the heavenly nature of the text and the fulfilled promises should be evidence enough to any reasonable soul of the bible’s truth and inerrancy. Though he was, at the time of preaching these sermons, opposed to subscription, his Westminsterian doctrine of the Scripture is detectable insofar as the Confession states, “And the heavenliness of the matter...the consent of all the parts...are arguments whereby [the Scripture] doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God.”<sup>57</sup>

His doctrinal point that unfolded through the rest of the sermon was, “That the accomplishment of the Old Testament prophecies concerning our Lord Jesus Christ are a sure evidence that He is the Messiah.”<sup>58</sup> In his improvement of this doctrine, Dickinson took liberties to emphasize his commitment to Covenant Theology,

Besides the more explicit prophecies of this great salvation in interpreted through almost every book of the Old Testament what were all the typical persons, the typical actions and ordinances, and what the whole Mosaic institution with the Levitical priesthood rights and ceremonies and especially their sacrifices and bloody oblations, but types and shadows of our blessed savior to keep alive their faith hope and desire of his salvation before his coming? There are indeed some historical parts of this holy book not properly prophetic but these have also their reference unto Christ and not only represent God's care, guidance, and government of his church, but

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<sup>57</sup> *The Confession of Faith: The Larger and Shorter Catechisms, with the Scripture Proofs at Large; Together with the Sum of Saving Knowledge (Contained in the Holy Scriptures, and Held Forth in the Said Confession and Catechisms) and Practical Use Thereof*, 5. repr (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publ, 1988), 1.5.

<sup>58</sup> Dickinson, *Reasonableness*, 79, 102-108.

also show us his faithfulness in securing the promised seed in the promised line and in preserving the tribes and tire that our Lord's descent might be as it was promised from the loins of Abraham, the tribe of Judah, and the family of David. Thus was a great part of the Old Testament an index to point out the Person of Christ, with the time, manner, end and consequence of His manifestation. And the full and bright accomplishment of all these things, is not only a verification of the promises and prophecies but a declaration from heaven that these scriptures were given by inspiration of God.<sup>59</sup>

This gave way to and anticipated the fourth and final sermon in Dickinson's most important work. "A Demonstration of the Christian Religion from the Miracles Wrought by our Lord Jesus Christ, Both Before and After His Crucifixion" was preached from Acts 2:22, "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know."

If sermon three was concerned with settling his people in the truth of the Word of God through fulfilled prophecies, then the primary concern in sermon four was to prove the bible's truth as demonstrated by the miracles performed by Jesus Himself and witnessed by many. These miracles attested to Jesus' sacred mission to draw sinners to Himself. If Jesus' mission was of divine origin, and if such was attested to by His miracles, then all of Christianity must surely be believed. Anything less would be unreasonable and would amount to madness,

Before I proceed to a particular application of this doctrine, I would here more particularly observe that whatever has been said to verify the divine mission of our Lord Jesus Christ may equally serve to confirm the truth and heavenly origin of the whole Christian religion. The doctrine, and the Person of Christ, are authorized of God, by the same seal of heaven. If the Lord Jesus be indeed the Son of God and redeemer of mankind, His institutions must be worthy of His glorious nature and office. If the apostles, and other holy writers, were indeed commissioned and inspired of Him

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<sup>59</sup> Dickinson, *Reasonableness*, 111-112.

[then] they were equally incapable to deceive us in an affair of everlasting consequence.<sup>60</sup>

The most undervalued aspect of *Reasonableness* comes in the conclusion to sermon four, where Dickinson displays a prophetic instinct concerning the years to come. It was 1732 and the young Presbyterian body was beginning to flirt with the division that would soon overtake it. Dickinson had just delivered his most important work in the subject of Christianity but knew some would object because of intramural fighting and discord. He was also only two years removed from the 1720s in which he was forced to navigate between warring parties for the good of the church. In what may be seen as typical Jonathan Dickinson, he labored to dissuade objectors from rejecting Christ altogether because of the behavior of fallible men.

I am sensible that there lies an objection in our way: Some may be ready to say, ‘How shall we know in what to serve Christ to His acceptance? There are so many particular sects and parties among professed Christians, each of whom censure and condemn the other, that we know not where to find rest for the soles of our feet, not in which of these different paths to steer our course for Heaven. This objection, I confess, may procure trouble and difficulty to some sincere and well-minded persons; as well as offence and scandal to them of a wavering and unsettled faith. I shall therefore spend the remaining time before us in obviating this difficulty and in giving you plain directions how you may be infallibly secure of serving Christ acceptably here; and of inheriting the reward of a patient continuance in well-doing hereafter.<sup>61</sup>

In response, Dickinson gave six reasons to follow Christ against the backdrop of inevitable division. First, labor to make sure of a true and lovely faith in Jesus Christ. Second, evidence the truth and sincerity of your faith by a holy and heavenly life. Third, embrace and live upon those doctrines which tend most to debase yourselves and magnify the free grace of God. Fourth, religiously

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<sup>60</sup> Dickinson, *Reasonableness*, 162.

<sup>61</sup> Dickinson, *Reasonableness*, 166-167.

attend all the ordinances and institution of Christ.<sup>62</sup> Fifth, concern yourselves as little as possible with matters of doubtful disputation: But where you must be of a party, choose the charitable side. Sixth, constantly and fervently commit your souls to the keeping and conduct of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>63</sup> He concluded *Reasonableness of Christianity* with a pastoral tone, never forgetting his primary call was a minister responsible to shepherd the souls of his people,

Let the Word of Christ be your rule of worship, your directory in the service of God. Let it be your care to keep the ordinances as they have been delivered to you in the holy scriptures; and while you adhere to this rule, be not ashamed to confess that after the way which some call heresy or schism, so worship you the God of your fathers. It must be the character of every true Christian that he endeavor to walk in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord, blamelessly...It's true, we can't our selves be of two contrary persuasions. It's of necessity that we part ways with those, in some disputed points, with whom we agree in the main foundations of our faith and hope; and with whom we hope to join in eternal anthems of praise...We must therefore not only carefully and diligently try ourselves, but with greatest earnestness and constancy, implore the directions of His Holy Spirit and wrestle with Him by earnest prayer that He will search us and guide us, and lead in the way everlasting; That He will guide us by His counsel and afterward bring us to glory<sup>64</sup>

Dickinson's pious advice through is grandest work, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, at the beginning of the decade was severely tested throughout the rest of the decade. With the rise of the Enlightenment came an increased subjectivity of the faith, disputed ideas about the nature of the will, and the unification of the protestant churches under the banner of Deism, each of which were anticipated in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*.

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<sup>62</sup> By the phrase, "ordinances and institution of Christ," Dickinson meant the ordinary means of grace, thereby signaling the character of his classical Reformed and Covenant theology ministry.

<sup>63</sup> Dickinson, *Reasonableness*, 167-175.

<sup>64</sup> Dickinson, *Reasonableness*, 175.

Dickinson's goal in writing *Reasonableness* was, among other things, to fortify and strengthen the church against the challenges she faced in the 1730s. He wanted to prove the reliability of the Christian religion based on revelation against a religion of nature because he sensed that the appeal of Locke and Kant represented a threat to sensitive souls eager for sacred truth and sound rationale.<sup>65</sup> Given his many efforts to unify and strengthen the church's purity of doctrine, one may wonder at the disappointment Dickinson must have felt over the splintering effect the Great Awakening had on his beloved Presbyterian Church. Earlier in his career he had labored for a corrective to what was, in his view, an overly dogmatic reformed Christianity in the colonies. More recently, he had labored for a well-reasoned approach to the faith and included a conciliatory note to conclude. He had hoped all sides could coalesce around these important doctrines.

#### At the Center of Discord

Underneath the weakening effect the Enlightenment was having on the church, the debates of the New Side / Old Side continued to rage. A wedge of distrust grew among them and helped bring the Presbyterian church to the brink of schism. The wedge was hammered into place with the dawning of the Great Awakening, as the Presbyterian church grappled with a way to understand *experiential religion*. Now the two sides disagreed not only over subscription, but also in their responses to the revival.

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<sup>65</sup> Edwin Hatfield summarizes the milieu of Dickinson's ministry and gives a clear indication of his motivation to publish these sermons, "the period in which he served the church was noted for the prevalence of skepticism. The writings of Hobbs, Blount, Tolland, Shaftsbury, Collins, Woolston, Wollaston, Tyndall, and Chubb, the modern apostles of deism had obtained a wide circulation, and were greedily devoured. It was fashionable to decry both inspiration and revelation. Men gloried in "the religion of nature," and decried the holy scriptures, the church, and the Christian. Reason was deified and Christ dethroned, the tendencies of the pulpit were toward a low Arminianism – latitudinarianism in doctrine and practice." See Hatfield, *History of Elizabeth*, 334–335.

Dickinson's brand of New Side Presbyterianism was far less bombastic than some of his fellow New Siders, most notably, the Tennent wing. His place in the fracturing church, then, is noteworthy because of the unique place he occupied. Though he aligned himself with them, he was skeptical of the New Side because his sympathies were with the theological acumen more associated with the Old Side. Still, he was dismayed at the apparent lack of spiritual fervor connected to the Old Side. That is, until August, 1739. Dickinson's own people of Elizabethtown had not yet experienced the Great Awakening. That month, however, brought the first fire seeds of revival to the only church Dickinson ever served. 1739 also witnessed a change in Jonathan Dickinson.

Dickinson's relationship to the Great Awakening was a complicated one. The most faithful way to describe his sentiments surrounding the revival through most of the 1730s is that he was in support of God's work but disenfranchised by the extremes. For that reason, until 1739/40, Dickinson was opposed to the Great Awakening, but only slightly so. Especially as the decade drew to a close, Dickinson found himself once again at the center of Presbyterian discord looking for a way forward.

Before 1739 there is no record of Dickinson promoting the revival. He did, however, preach a sermon in October of that year in which he objected to certain elements of the revival.<sup>66</sup> That should not necessarily be construed as ardent opposition, but as cautious optimism. His unique ability to see the troubling trajectory of both extremes, together with his irenic personality, demands a fair reading. We would not agree with David Harlan, for instance, who falls into unbalanced assumptions by characterizing Dickinson's book *A Display of God's Special Grace* as so devoted to a

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<sup>66</sup> Cornman, *Caterpillars*, 133.

moderation as to lack conviction: “Because he himself felt deeply ambivalent and uncertain [about the Great Awakening], Dickinson was able to write a dialogue in which each of the characters expressed ambivalence and uncertainty.” Dickinson was cautious about the extremes on both sides of the Awakening, indeed critical. But he was not ambivalent or uncertain about his own beliefs.<sup>67</sup>

That Dickinson was not uncertain can be discerned from his 1740 sermon, *The Witness of the Spirit*. The previous year he welcomed George Whitfield to his Elizabethtown pulpit and began to see spiritual awakening in his church and community. In *The Witness of the Spirit*, Dickinson preempted Jonathan Edwards’ more famous sermon from 1741, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* by hitting similar notes of dreadful threat,

Can rational Creatures cast themselves down the dreadful Precipice with their Eyes open! Can they run upon the flaming Sword, when it's brandished before their Breasts! Can they venture upon Hell & eternal Damnation, without Care or Fear! When seriously consider'd, it seems impossible: and yet it's obvious to every Observer, that this is the Conduct of the far greatest Part of the World of Mankind; and it will continue to be the Conduct of every unconverted Sinner, until the Spirit of God opens their Eyes, sets their Danger in View, and awakens them out of this stupid and dead State. It is accordingly the first Operation of the blessed Spirit in order to a Sinner's Sanctification, to *convince him of Sin*. (Joh. xvi 8) This he sometimes does more *suddenly*; and by a more *forceable Impression*, filling the Soul with the greatest Agony & Distress, from the most lively Views of his aggravated Sins, and of the amazing Wrath of God. This alarms all the Powers and Passions of the Soul, *pricks the poor Sinner to the Heart*, which (Acts ii. 37) causeth him to (Acts xvi. 29) *tremble and be astonished with Saul* at his Conversion. (Emphasis original)<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> David C Harlan, “World of Double Visions and Second Thoughts: Jonathan Dickinson’s Display of God’s Special Grace,” *Early American Literature* 2, no. 21 (1986): 121.

<sup>68</sup> Jonathan Dickinson, *The Witness of the Spirit. A Sermon Preached at Newark in New-Jersey, May 7th. 1740. Wherein Is Distinctly Shewn, in What Way and Manner the Spirit Himself Beareth Witness to the Adoption of the Children of God: On Occasion of a Wonderful Progress of Converting Grace in Those Parts*, 1740, 6–7, accessed August 10, 2022. <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N03683.0001.001>. In this sermon, Dickinson decried the excesses of the extreme New Siders, which in turn prompted them to exclude Dickinson from preaching at the next meeting of Synod.

Early in the Presbyterian schism, he wrote *A Display of God's Special Grace*, which was his first publication fully devoted to the issue of the awakening. All previous addresses were in the form of sermons, mostly to his own congregation in an attempt to enliven them. But by 1741 he felt the need to address the complexity of the revival head-on.

*A Display of God's Special Grace* is, perhaps, his clearest expression of his own opinion on the matter. It takes the form of a dialog between a minister named Theophilus (who was Dickinson himself) and an elderly, conscientious member of his church nicknamed Epinetus, after the first convert in Asia from Romans 16:5. Epinetus is distressed over his own condition and the Great Awakening disturbances then taking place. Through the course of six objections to the revival, Theophilus (Dickinson) gives a defense of the ways of God. He carefully outlines a puritan idea of preparationism, which accounts for the New Side ministers' tendency to preach the terrors of the law. His point to Epinetus is that men cannot revive themselves and that apart from the law men would see no need to revive themselves even if they had the native ability to do so.

This becomes interesting to the interpreter of the Presbyterian schism because it laid the foundation for Dickinson to promote the revival while also taking head-on the challenges its extreme proponents presented to the work. He acknowledged the censorious nature of too many of his fellow New Side ministers. Epinetus' objection was, "I can't understand the new method of discoursing about religious experiences," by

which he lamented the troubling nature of the censorious New Side.<sup>69</sup>

Dickinson agreed that many of his colleagues had fallen into the sin of judgmentalism and proposed five ways they had done damage to the witness of the Spirit in the revival, the most important of which was the last,

When men run into these methods of judging those ministers of the gospel, who are visibly well qualified for the ministry, and have visibly conducted themselves well in the discharge of their sacred trust, they are more aggravatedly guilty of this sin; By prejudicing people against their ministers; And thereby making them slight the ordinances of the gospel, so to the great danger of their precious souls. This is to do violence to that admonition of 1 Timothy 5:19, ‘against an elder receive no accusation but before two or three witnesses,’ and to that exhortation of Philippians 2:29, ‘hold such in reputation - upon the whole they who have been guilty in any of these instances have great reason for a particular and deep repentance and for a solemn care to reform their future conduct.’<sup>70</sup>

Dickinson continued to decry the poles and strike a middle ground while trying to awaken his people to their true spiritual condition. Especially from the summer of 1739, upon Whitfield’s visit, to the end of his life, there can be no doubt that he settled firmly on the New Side. What made Jonathan Dickinson the most important leader of the era, however, was how he handled the other side.

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<sup>69</sup> Jonathan Dickinson, *A Display of God’s Special Grace. In a Familiar Dialogue between a Minister & a Gentleman of His Congregation, about the Work of God, in the Conviction and Conversion of Sinners, so Remarkably of Late Begun and Going on in These American Parts. : Wherein the Objections against Some Uncommon Appearances amongst Us Are Distinctly Consider’d, Mistakes Rectify’d, and the Work Itself Particularly Prov’d to Be from the Holy Spirit. : With an Addition, in a Second Conference, Relating to Sundry Antinomian Principles, Beginning to Obtain in Some Places. : To Which Is Prefixed an Attestation, by Several Ministers of Boston, 1742, 53, accessed August 10, 2022. <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N03997.0001.001>.*

<sup>70</sup> Dickinson. *Display*, 69-70. The other four are, 1) that while the censorious people may have had zeal for God, it was not according to knowledge, 2) those who are unfamiliar with the religious experiences of others, yet would censure their religious state are guilty of judgmentalism, 3) those who publish and proclaim their apprehensions of regular and blameless Christians as being mere formalists are guilty of divisiveness, 4) those who with, “rigour, roughness and asperity” do admonish regular Christians as formalists and thereby determine if they are saved or not are likewise guilty of divisiveness. See Dickinson, *Display*, 67-69. For further commentary of *Display*, see Herbert L Samworth, “Those Astonishing Wonders,” 215–32.

When the New Brunswick Presbytery was excised from Synod in 1741 because of the censoriousness that Dickinson decried, the Presbyterian Church in the colonies was formally split. At that time, the New York Presbytery, though not yet formally aligned with the New Side, was sympathetic with the New Siders and grieved over the actions of the Old Siders, which they interpreted as harsh, unnecessary, and potentially unconstitutional. The leader of the New York Presbytery was Jonathan Dickinson, who by now was so grieved by the ungracious action of the Old Siders at the 1741 Synod and the judgmental heat from the New Siders that he traveled to New England to consult with Jonathan Edwards about the schism. It was at this meeting that Dickinson came to believe each side had erred significantly and that each side had room to repent.

The Presbyterians of the era knew that if anyone could bring about healing to the fractured church, it was Jonathan Dickinson. He was elected moderator of the 1742 Synod for that very reason, but his proposal that each side offer concession fell on deaf ears, as neither was willing to go as far as Dickinson requested. There was no moving forward between the two sides because neither side trusted the other to make a fair judgement over the legality of the 1741 excision. Where Dickinson succeeded in holding the church together over the subscription controversy, he was unable to do so with the arrival of the Great Awakening.

In a move that should put to rest any notion that Dickinson's irenic moderation meant he was willing to sacrifice all things on the altar of experiential unity, it was his refusal to sign a plan of reunion in 1745 that formally brought about the Synod of New York and guaranteed a divided church until long after his death. Being that as it may, his

influence in the newly formed Synod was, once again a moderating one, which can be argued laid the first foundation for the eventual reunion.<sup>71</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Jonathan Dickinson died on October 7, 1747, after five months serving the College of New Jersey as its first president. He had kept the Presbyterian Church together during its first tumultuous decade. He brought George Whitfield to his house and to his pulpit and saw the power of God, even against his native caution. He shared the elevated status with Jonathan Edwards, even joining him to recruit David Brainerd to be a missionary. He was the best Presbyterian of his day, but the best of Presbyterianism did not die with him. He contended for the purity of the faith and for the unity of the brethren. The lasting lessons from his life include the necessity to fight for what is noble and true in a way that brings factional parties together without sacrifice of either doctrine or unity.

A re-examination of Jonathan Dickinson is in order, not only for his scholarship, but as a useful paradigm that may tend toward the health and way forward of the Presbyterian Church in America as it pursues the purity and unity of the church. It is doubtful that purity and unity are achievable in a meaningful way absent antecedent, agreed upon limits and order. Familiarity with Dickinson's pastoral approach to define one and defend the other may pave a trail toward to that end and compel the contemporary PCA toward renewed theological and biblical reflection on the purity and unity of the church.

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<sup>71</sup> Cornman, *Caterpillars*, 140.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR THE PURITY AND UNITY OF THE CHURCH

The struggle for the purity and unity of the church was hardly unique to the infant Presbyterian body in the colonies. With each generation comes a new set of threats, yet there remains relatively little theological output on the biblical mandate to pursue both the purity and unity of the church.<sup>1</sup> Rather, one is typically sacrificed for the other. Presbyterian leaders have long struggled to find a way forward in creating a culture that actively pursues the purity and unity of their churches, especially in the context of various sorts of diversity. Given the scriptural imperative to pursue the purity and unity of the church, a natural question centers on what the bible says about it. Universally, Christians agree that the purity and unity of the church are biblical categories, but they have been stripped of their meaning. In what way does doctrinal purity affect the unity of the church? David Murray explains that “unity and diversity are biblical words that have been stolen by the world – the worldly church as well as the worldly world – emptied of biblical meaning and filled with all kinds of false and perverse ideas.”<sup>2</sup> When the idea of unity is stripped of its biblical foundation the result is likely to be confusion or, at best,

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to suggest that there is little emphasis on *either* the purity or the unity of the church. However, there is comparatively little emphasis on the relationship between purity and unity in the church, or whether or not one is possible without the other.

<sup>2</sup> David Murray, “The Unity and Diversity of Christ’s Beautiful Bride,” in Joel R. Beeke, *The Beauty and Glory of Christ’s Bride*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), 37.

latent frustration. Murray argues that this creates an ecclesiastical environment that simply stops the hard work of pursuing meaningful unity,

Another sad consequence is that those who are orthodox have overreacted to the abuses (of worldly ideas of unity) by rarely speaking about Christian unity, except to criticize it, and even more rarely working for it. However, we must not let the precious vocabulary and principles of Christian unity fall into neglect or be stolen from us by those who have deliberately twisted and misused them.

There are different types of unity within the evangelical community. Therefore, a baseline understanding of Christian unity must take them into account. For instance, theological unity may exist when there is shared commitment to the Westminster Standards. However, there can be different ecclesiastical settings among those who profess allegiance to the Confession.<sup>3</sup> There might be brothers who agree on both the Confession and ecclesiastical structures, but they have different expressions of worship.

Purity, especially doctrinal purity, in the church is a related matter. In an anti-theological age, few Christians give serious thought to the role theological purity plays in the church's hopes for meaningful unity.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Witness the separate existence of the PCA, the OPC, the EPC and the ARP, all of whom share a commitment to the Westminster Standards yet remain separate Presbyterian bodies.

<sup>4</sup> In the Reformed community there is a resurgence of interest in the value of theology as it relates to the health of the church. See Colin Hansen, "All Systems Go: Why We Shouldn't Devalue Systematic Theology," *Christianity Today*, April 18, 2008, accessed March 20, 2023, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2008/april/116-52.0.html>. For the social impact of an anti-theological church, see R. Albert Mohler Jr., "The Equality Act and the Rise of the Anti-Theological State," *Public Discourse*, March 15, 2021, accessed March 20, 2023, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2021/03/74750/>. Mark Noll has famously said, "The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind. An extraordinary range of virtues is found among the sprawling throngs of evangelical Protestants in North America, including great sacrifice in spreading the message of salvation in Jesus Christ, open-hearted generosity to the needy, heroic personal exertion on behalf of troubled individuals, and the unheralded sustenance of countless church and parachurch communities. Notwithstanding all their other virtues, however, American evangelicals are not exemplary for their thinking, and they have not been so for several generations." See Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 3.

Murray ties doctrinal and ethical purity to real and meaningful unity by identifying six types of unity within Christianity. According to Murray,

1. Spiritual unity is the unity that all Christians have in Christ. We may differ in a multitude of ways, yet all those who are truly born again are united to Christ by His Holy Spirit and, through Him, to one another.
2. Doctrinal unity is oneness on what we believe the Bible to teach, usually defined by one of the historic confessions of faith.
3. Practical unity is unity in what we understand to be the implications and practical applications of the doctrines on which we agree. For example, there may be Christians and churches who hold to the Westminster Confession of Faith and yet differ in their views of how to evangelize, conduct missions or educate children. The unity we aspire to is agreement among Christians and churches on what the Christian life and church life should look like. Another word for this might be ethical or moral unity.
4. Experiential unity is oneness in our experience of salvation and the Lord's communion with us. We all know Christians to whom we can confide about spiritual things because they believe the same things we do regarding the importance of the Holy Spirit's work in convicting us of sin, drawing us to Christ, regenerating us, applying salvation to our consciences, supplying grace for our daily lives, enabling us to overcome temptation, developing spiritual graces and gifts in us, and so on. But if we talk to other Christians about these things, their eyes glaze over, and they look at us as if we are totally weird. They seem to have little if any Christian experience in the past or the present - at least none resembling our own.
5. Liturgical unity is agreement as to how we understand worship to be conducted both in spirit and content. We agree on the regulative principle of worship and what it means in practice.
6. Ecclesiastical unity might also be called institutional unity. It is the unity that different churches formally and officially enjoy at a denominational level, or more locally and informally on a congregational level.<sup>5</sup>

Michael Barrett builds on Murray as he discusses the importance of doctrinal purity in the church as a necessary corollary to the church's unity. In effect, he reverses Murray's approach by prioritizing purity, which only then can promote unity. Barrett emphasizes four key principles of church purity, collectively called "Healthy Holiness," that may be noted from the biblical witness on the importance of purity in the church.

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<sup>5</sup> Murray, in Beeke, *Beauty and Glory*, 37-39.

For Barrett, holiness is logical, possible, visible, and therapeutic.<sup>6</sup> For Barrett, this “Healthy Holiness” can be enjoyed in the church when its foundation is an agreed upon set of doctrines.

As evangelicals we believe the scriptures provide the best and only rationale for all things, even those things that are complex or might lead good men to different conclusions. Therefore, this chapter attempts to understand the biblical idea of purity and unity in a cohesive way, including the theological foundations for the purity and unity of the Church, as well as exegetical analysis and pastoral implications of biblical texts that relate specifically to the purity and unity of the church. This chapter, then, will argue that neither purity nor unity is possible without the other, because each requires the other as a foundation.

For what did Jesus pray in John 17? What was the Apostle Paul’s vision for the Ephesian church in Ephesians 4? Did the New Testament authors build on an Old Testament idea when they advocated for the church’s purity and unity? Is there a theological framework for the purity and unity of God’s people? These are the questions this chapter aims to answer by looking into the purity and unity of God’s people from five angles, each centering on scripture:

- Section 1: John 17:1-5 and the Eschatological Context
- Section 2: John 17:13-21 and the Teleological Context
- Section 3: John 17:21-24 and the Trinitarian Context
- Section 4: Ephesians 4:1-16 and the Ecclesiastical Context

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Barrett, “The Healthy Holiness of Christ’s Bride,” in Joel R. Beeke, *The Beauty and Glory of Christ’s Bride*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), 26-36. We might wish to add a fifth: Holiness has a Standard, namely confessionalism.

- Section 5: Psalm 133 and the Hebraic Context

### Section 1: John 17:1-5: The Eschatological Context

“Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You,<sup>2</sup> even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life...Now Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.”

Few scriptures elicit the sort of intimacy and sense of ‘being there’ like the Upper Room Discourse, especially the High Priestly Prayer of John 17.<sup>7</sup> Jesus’ prayer here recorded has been a source of comfort and sweet rest for Christians ever since it was prayed. It is said, for instance, that John Knox, key leader of the Scottish reformation, asked for his wife to read John 17 as he approached death. Custom has it that he passed to glory to his wife’s voice reading these tender words.<sup>8</sup> In this prayer, Jesus peels back the curtain of eternity and invites the reader into the very inner sanctum of His relationship with His Father. Jesus introduces a concept that the disciples would never have encountered before: that their union with one another is based on their union with Christ and flows from it. However, what adds special weight to His prayer is that he prays with an eye on the post-Pentecostal church. There is eschatological significance to Jesus’ prayer. In the preface to his Expository Sermons on John 17, Anthony Burgess says of Jesus’ prayer,

First, here is the system, as it were, of most exact and pure divinity...Second, as this chapter is thus the compendium and marrow of

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<sup>7</sup> Andreas Köstenberger points out, “The prayer (of John 17) is often called Jesus’ ‘High Priestly Prayer’ (a designation reaching back at least as far as the sixteenth century), though this label hardly fits with Johannine thought, which does not picture Jesus as a high priest (Ridderbos 1997: 546; Carson 1991: 552-53)...Westcott’s and E.C. Hoskyn’s title ‘prayer of consecration,’ though not without merit, fails to encompass the contents of the entire prayer. Hence, commentators now frequently opt for more generic titles of the present prayer, such as, ‘The Farewell Address (Ridderbos) or ‘The Prayer of Jesus (Carson). Witherington (1995: 266) calls it, ‘The Sage’s Prayer,’ based on his view that the Fourth Evangelist portrays Jesus as a sage.” For further discussion, see Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 484.

<sup>8</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 1247.

divinity, so it is also the foundation of the ministry, yea and of the church also. For as at the creation by that word of blessings, “increase and multiply,” all things have their being, and are continued therein, so from the virtue and efficacy of this prayer, the ministry, the ordinances, the church itself, have their existence and preservation. Third, whereas the life and comfort of believers lies in their union with Christ in communion with one another, this precious truth is largely mentioned by our savior, which gives occasion to treat of a believer’s union with Christ as also the union which ought to be among believers, from which foundation we treat concerning the means to preserve unity, as also the causes of divisions among them, and likewise how far a forbearance and toleration in a church way (for that question of a political and civil one is not so pertinent to our savior’s words) is to be yielded unto in respect of erring brethren. Lastly this prayer of Christ may be compared to a land flowing with milk and honey, in respect of that treasure of consolation which is contained therein.<sup>9</sup>

In the preceding chapters, 13 through 16, Jesus had been with His disciples for an extended time of teaching and fellowship, but the cross was always looming. Soon, Jesus would exit the Upper Room, having dismissed Judas to carry out his wicked work, and cross the Kidron Valley to enter the garden near the Mount of Olives. From there He would be arrested and tried, eventually sentenced to execution, and put to death. Before that would happen, Jesus would pray. John 17 is that prayer, a rare occasion when we get to listen in, as it were, to the prayer of the Savior in His final private moments with the eleven.<sup>10</sup> It is noteworthy that His prayer, is for Himself (1-12), then for the disciples (13-19) and finally for all those who would come from a diversity of nations, backgrounds, and experiences to a saving faith in Him (20-24).

### The Hour

“And lifting up His eyes to heaven, he said, “Father, the hour has come.” The emphasis in verse one is on the fact that the hour has now arrived. One gets the sense

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<sup>9</sup> Anthony Burgess and Joel R. Beeke, *Christ’s Prayer before His Passion: Expository Sermons on John 17* v.1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2020), xlvi–xlix.

<sup>10</sup> This is not the only occasion where Jesus’ prayer is recorded. The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 contains The Lord’s Prayer (6:9-12). See also Luke 11:2-4.

that the hour, for both the Father and the Son, has been long anticipated. The New Testament idea of ‘the hour’ is critical for a meaningful understanding of why Jesus begins His prayer this way. This prayer represents something of a Mount Everest in the gospels; a high peak that casts a long shadow on everything that comes after it.<sup>11</sup> By moving the word, “ἐλήλυθεν” (it has come) to the unnatural position before the term “ἡ ὥρα” (the hour), John is emphasizing its importance. This is a new day. Something different is being inaugurated as Jesus turns toward his cross-work. That Jesus was tying his cross-work to the hour having arrived signals that the plan of redemption was reaching a crescendo, and the spiritual reality of His people’s union was central to the plan.

The Johannine concept of “the hour” first appears in John 2 and carries eschatological significance. “ἡ ὥρα” is a major feature in the fourth gospel. Gerald Borchert identifies “the hour” as a major marker in Jesus’ prayer in that it provides the presupposition that, “the crucial Passover death of Jesus was at hand” and that, “everything in this chapter presupposed His imminent departure,”<sup>12</sup> Jesus’ prayer was specifically mission driven, focusing His attention on His own mission of glorifying the Father through His own death., for that hour was now upon Him. John deploys the term twenty-five times throughout his gospel, seventeen of which indicate a specific time of

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther was moved enough by Jesus’ prayer in John 17 that he was compelled to say, “This is truly, beyond measure, a warm and hearty prayer. He opens the depths of His heart, both in reference to us and to His father, and He pours them all out. He sounds so honest, so simple, it is so deep, so rich, so wide, no one can fathom it.” Likewise, Melancthon understood the towering importance of this prayer, “There is no voice which has ever been heard, either in heaven or in earth more exalted, more holy, more fruitful, more sublime, than the prayer offered up by the Son to God Himself.” Both quoted in Boice, *John*, 1246–47.

<sup>12</sup> Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12-21*, The New American Commentary, v. 25B (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 190.

God's appointment.<sup>13</sup> There are two times in John's gospel that Jesus says His time "καὶρὸς" has not yet come. Both ὥρα and καιρὸς have significance for the messianic moment of Christ. Whether the hour/time has come or has not come, when used of Jesus' hour/time, the term refers to the revelation of the Son's glory in His messianic work. The term always serves as a signpost pointing to the Father's good pleasure in receiving and approving the work of the Son, by which He was glorified. Andres Köstenberger explains,

The phrase "the time has come" is used as a dramatic device throughout the Gospel ("not yet come": 2:4, 7:30, 8:20, "has come": 12:23, 13:1, cf. 13:31-32), building toward the climax of the "glorification of the Son" – John's shorthand for the cluster of events comprising Jesus' crucifixion, burial, resurrection, ascension, and exaltation with God the Father. For Jesus, the arrival of his hour is not reason for resigned fatalism but incentive to increased prayer (Carson 1991:553)<sup>14</sup>

### The Glory

"Glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify you." Jesus' prayer to be glorified may seem strange. That is, was He not already glorified? Why, then, the need to pray that the Father would glorify Him in John 17:1 and 5? The Tyndale Bible Dictionary defines the Greek concept of glory (δόξα) in two ways,

The glory of God can be described in two senses: (1) as a general category or attribute, and (2) as a specific category referring to particular historical manifestations of his presence.<sup>15</sup>

The glory with which Jesus was already glorified refers specifically to the attributes and characteristics of God. James Montgomery Boice suggests that the glory of

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<sup>13</sup> The remaining eight uses deal with the time of a day, such as, "it was about the sixth hour (ὥρα)" in John 19:14.

<sup>14</sup> Köstenberger, *John*, 486.

<sup>15</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, Tyndale Reference Library (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 534.

God that Jesus refers to in verses 1 and 5 has to do with his attributes, or characteristics.<sup>16</sup> More than the other gospels, John celebrates the pre-existence of the second person of the trinity.<sup>17</sup> Jesus was before all things and is the eternal Word. He was fully glorified with the Father before the incarnation. He never set aside this glory while He was on earth in the sense of possessing the fullness of God, yet His earthly glory was not seen in its fulness.<sup>18</sup>

In the incarnation, Jesus retained the glory of God insofar as He revealed the character of the Father, yet He set aside the visible, bright and burning glory of God. This idea of glory was a Jewish concept of the manifestation of God's presence, as in the Shekinah glory of Moses' day.<sup>19</sup> Here, in John 17 on the precipice of completing the work of redemption through His sufferings, He prays that He might again receive the outward, shining glory of His father that He possessed before the incarnation; that glory that was set aside in the incarnation.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Boice, *John*, 1248.

<sup>17</sup>For fuller discussion on the Johannine concept of the pre-existent Christ, see Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, 488.

<sup>18</sup> The question of what Jesus laid aside in the incarnation is the further concern of the Kenosis doctrine from Philippians 2:7, "But emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men." In His emptying of Himself, Jesus did not set aside His divinity or His equality with God, but certain of His privileges, including the glory He shared with the Father before the incarnation. For discussion, see G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 146–53. William Hendriksen makes a specific connection between Philippians 2:7 and Jesus' prayer for glory in John 17, "He gave up His heavenly glory...From the infinite sweep of eternal delight in the very presence of his Father he willingly descended into this realm of misery in order to pitch his tent for a while among sinful men. He, before whom the seraphim covered their faces (Isa. 6:1-3; John 12:41), the Object of most solemn adoration, voluntarily descended to the realm where he was 'despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.'" See William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon: Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 108.

<sup>19</sup> See Exodus 34:29-35.

<sup>20</sup> For more on this point, see Boice, *John*, 1248–1247. See also Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, rev.ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 635, 638–39.

By staging this prayer in the context of the hour having now arrived, and by emphasizing that He is glorified with the Father in that hour because of His pending victory over death, Jesus signifies that what He is praying is on the basis of His completed work of redemption, even though He still had to endure the final suffering on the cross. By seeking and receiving the glory of the Father, which Christ shared before the incarnation, Jesus signified that He was completing the work He was sent to do, namely, to grant eternal life and to establish a unified people, adopted as sons under the sovereignty of God.

#### Divine Authority

God the Father, in signaling His divine approval of the work of God the Son, has not only shared His glory with the Son in a sort of reciprocal glorification, but He has also given the Son divine authority in verse 2, καθὼς ἔδωκας αὐτῷ ἐξουσίαν πάσης σαρκός, ἵνα πᾶν ὃ δέδωκας αὐτῷ δώσῃ αὐτοῖς ζωὴν αἰώνιον. “Even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life.” The aorist active verb, “ἔδωκας” from “δίδωμι,” is in the second person singular, emphasizing that it is God the Father who does the giving to God the Son. In this case, what is given is divine authority, “Even as you gave Him authority (ἐξουσίαν) over all flesh.” In the four gospels, the word ἐξουσίαν appears forty-three times in any of its derivatives, but each of them stems from the idea of possessing the ability to do or say something with inherent power.<sup>21</sup> When ascribed to Jesus, ἐξουσία is always attended by a charge or command, as in Matthew 28:18-19, “And Jesus came up and spoke to

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<sup>21</sup> Werner Foerster, “Ἐξεστίν, Ἐξουσία, Ἐξουσιάζω, Κατεξουσιάζω,” ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 562.

them, saying, “<sup>18</sup>All *authority* (ἐξουσία) has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.<sup>19</sup>Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” In John 17:2, Jesus declares that His heavenly Father had given Him divine authority over all flesh, followed by a ἵνα clause, or a clause of definitive, causal significance, ἵνα πᾶν ὃ δέδωκας αὐτῷ δώσῃ αὐτοῖς ζωὴν αἰώνιον, “that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life.” The authority given to Jesus would surely and irresistibly result in the inheritance of eternal life among those so appointed.

The hour, the glory and the divine authority of Jesus set the eschatological context for His prayer for the redemption and unity of His people.

### Section 2. John 17:13-21: The Teleological Context

<sup>17</sup>“Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. <sup>18</sup>“As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. <sup>19</sup>“For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth.”

In John 17:13-21, Jesus’ prayer is centered on the disciples that were still with him. He prayed for them in five specific ways:

Verse	Prayer
John 17:13	That the disciples would have their joy made full and complete because of Jesus’ spoken Word in the world.
John 17:14-15	That by the power of the Word, the disciples would be kept from the evil one in a world that hates them because of their witness to heavenly truth.
John 17:17	That the disciples would be sanctified in the truth as they learn the Word of truth.
John 17:18	That the disciples would be sent into the world in the same way Christ was sent into the world.
John 17:19	That the disciples would be sanctified in the truth in the same way Christ was sanctified.

### That They May Be Sanctified

Four of the five specific prayer requests that Jesus carried before the Father centered on the disciples' acquaintance with the Word of truth. The end goal, the telos, was that the disciples would be sanctified, "in the truth." If they were going to be faithful witnesses in the world or model the beauty of heaven and the power of the gospel, the disciples needed first to be of sound life and doctrine.

One may hear the echoes of Jesus' prayer for the disciples in Paul's first letter to Timothy, "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching" (1 Timothy 4:16). For the disciples, which we may consider the infant church, what they knew about the Word of God and how necessarily that Word governed their lives, determined the extent of their success in the ministry, and provided a basis for the unity of His people that Jesus prayed for.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones points out the importance of arriving at a careful definition of what is meant by 'sanctify' (ἁγιάσων) in these verses, especially because Jesus uses the same word to describe Himself in verse 19.<sup>22</sup> With rare, if any, exception, ἁγιάσων is unique to biblical, Koine Greek. Its root word, ἁγιάζω, carries two related but distinct meanings. In some uses it means to make or declare holy, or hallowed. In the passive sense it means to cause someone to have the qualities of holiness or moral purity.<sup>23</sup> This is the way ἁγιάζω is deployed in 1 Thessalonians 5:21-23, for example, "<sup>21</sup>But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; <sup>22</sup>abstain from every form of evil. <sup>23</sup>Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify (ἁγιάζω) you entirely; and may your spirit

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<sup>22</sup> David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Assurance of Our Salvation: Exploring the Depth of Jesus' Prayer for His Own: Studies in John 17* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000), 352–353.

<sup>23</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1996), 744.

and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The other sense of ἀγιάζω is that of consecration, or the setting apart of someone or something for special use. So, John 10:34-36, “<sup>34</sup>Jesus answered them, ‘Has it not been written in your Law, ‘I SAID, YOU ARE GODS’? <sup>35</sup>‘If he called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken), <sup>36</sup>do you say of Him, whom the Father sanctified (ἀγιάζω) and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’?’”

In what way, then, does Jesus pray for His disciples to be sanctified in John 17:17-19? In short, both ways. Jesus desires his people to be sanctified in the sense of being declared holy and being sanctified in the sense of being set apart or consecrated.

Calvin merges both meanings of ἀγιάζω by saying,

This sanctification includes the Kingdom of God and his righteousness; That is, when God renews us by his spirit and confirms in us the grace of renewal, and continues it to the end. He asks first, therefore, that the Father would sanctify the disciples, or in other words, that he would consecrate them entirely to himself, and defend them as his sacred inheritance. Next, he points out that the means of sanctification, and not without reason; for there are fanatics who indulge in much useless prattle about sanctification, but who neglect the truth of God, by which he consecrates us to himself. Again, as there are others who chatter quite as foolishly about the truth, and yet disregard the word, Christ expressly says that the truth, by which God sanctifies his sons, is not to be found anywhere else than in the word.

Thy word is truth; For the word here denotes the doctrine of the gospel, which the apostles had already heard from the mouth of their master and which they were afterwards to preach to others.<sup>24</sup>

### Sanctified In the Truth

In verse 17 Jesus has in view the power of the Word of God to make His people holy. This much is clear because His desire is that they be sanctified *in the Truth*. The truth of God, as revealed in His Word, is the means by which the Holy Spirit changes a person's heart and moves him toward greater experiential holiness. In his remarks on John 17:17, Anthony Burgess refers to the transforming power of the Word of sacred truth as, "the instrumental cause of our sanctification," and is what Jesus prays for in that verse.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, this cannot be the meaning of ἀγιάζω in verse 19 because it would contradict Jesus' nature. He is perfectly holy, morally pure and unblemished. For that reason, He does not "sanctify Himself." The meaning of ἀγιάζω in verse 19 is that of consecration. Lloyd-Jones reflects,

So in its primary meaning this word is a description of our position. It means that as Christians we are separated from the world. Our Lord has already said that in verse 16 - let me emphasize again the importance of watching every single statement in this prayer and noticing the perfect cohesion of it all - 'they are not of the world.' Now he says, 'sanctify them in the truth.' They have been set apart, he says in effect; set them still more

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<sup>24</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, Calvin's Commentaries v. 18 (Wilmington, DE: Associated Publishers and Authors), 179-180. Calvin continues his thought with an eye on the progress of sanctification through the preaching of the word, "In this sense Paul says that the church has been cleansed with the washing of water by the word of life. Ephesians 5:26. True it is God alone who sanctifies; But as the gospel is the power of God to salvation to everyone that believes, whoever departs from the gospel as the means must become more and more filthy and polluted. The truth is here taken by way of eminence, for the light of heavenly wisdom in which God manifests himself to us that he may conform us to his image. The outward preaching of the word, it is true, does not of itself accomplish this, for that preaching is wickedly profaned by the reprobate; But let us remember that Christ speaks of the elect, whom the Holy Spirit efficaciously regenerates by the word. Now as the apostles were not altogether destitute of this grace, we ought to infer from Christ's words that sanctification is not instantly completed in us on that first day, but that we make progress in it through the whole course of our life, till at length God having taken away from us the garment of the flesh fills us with his righteousness."

<sup>25</sup> Burgess, *Christ's Prayer*, v.2, 167.

apart: it means this separation from the world. God said to the children of Israel, “thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God: the Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself (Deut. 7:6). And that is applied in 1 Peter 2:9 to the Christian Church: ‘Ye are,’ it is said again ‘a peculiar people,’ a special possession for the Lord. It does not mean that the nation of Israel was sinless, but it does mean that they had been set apart as God's peculiar, special people; and at the same time is true of the church and of all Christian people. We are a holy nation, set apart for God and for his service and for this purpose. That is the primary meaning.<sup>26</sup>

Jesus’ prayer in verses 17-19, then, is that His disciples would be sanctified both in terms of their spiritual and moral purity, and in their consecration for the ministry of the Word as they are sent in the world that would not accept their message.

In John 17:20, Jesus expands His prayer for the disciples into something global and perpetual, Οὐ περὶ τούτων δὲ ἐρωτῶ μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ περὶ τῶν πιστευόντων διὰ τοῦ λόγου αὐτῶν εἰς ἐμέ, “I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word.” The word, πιστευόντων, is a present participle that clearly refers to those in the future; those who will believe in Him.<sup>27</sup> This is an unusual construction in that priority is given to the manner in which others will eventually come to faith (namely, through the word of the apostles who have been sanctified in both senses) over the One in whom they would believe (namely, “In Me”). It is at this point, then, that Jesus’ prayer expands from his immediate disciples to all those through all times that would believe His disciples’ word.

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<sup>26</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *Assurance*, 354.

<sup>27</sup> For fuller discussion, see footnote 248 in Herman N. Ridderbos and John Vriend, *The Gospel According to John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 558. Though the participle πιστευόντων is present, there is collective agreement that the context promotes a futuristic sense, as in similar usages in The Upper Room Discourse. Morris examines the Messianic emphasis on all those who will believe in the apostles’ message, tying together their intrinsic unity through their faith in the common Savior. See Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 648–650.

With His focus on all Christians throughout the world, across all cultures, epochs and languages, Jesus' prayer could hardly be for anything other than what it is: for the purity and unity of His people. Verse 20 is the 'who' of Jesus' prayer. Vs 21 introduces the 'what' of Jesus prayer; that is, what Jesus actually prays for when He prays for us. Verse 21 is another ἵνα clause that introduces a purpose or cause, ἵνα πάντες ἕνωσιν, "That they may all be one."

When the focus of Jesus' prayer turns toward all Christians in every age, the centerpiece becomes their unity. This unity would have been a hopeless dream without there being a pre-existing purity of life and an agreed upon body of doctrine among the people. But if purity is established, then how could Jesus pray for anything other than their unity?

### **Section 3. John 17:21-24: The Trinitarian Context**

<sup>21</sup>That they may all be one; even as You, Father, *are* in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. <sup>22</sup>"The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; <sup>23</sup>I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me. <sup>24</sup>"Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world."

There are two Greek New Testament words for "unity," ἐνότης and σύνδεσμος, neither of which appears in John 17. Rather, Jesus simply prays for their *oneness* (ἕνω). In verse 21, Jesus prays for the oneness of all believers, but that oneness is not left as an ungrounded ideal. Rather, the oneness that all believers enjoy is grounded in trinitarian ontology.

## Oneness in Kind and Character

καθὼς in verse 21 introduces the dependent clause, in this case an adverbial comparative, “just as you, Father, are in Me and I in you, so that they may also be in Us.” Verses 21 and 23 share a similar construct and make a similar point. When read with verse 23, “I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity,” there is a certain gravity of importance to the focus of Jesus’ prayer.<sup>28</sup> Both verses show the relationship that believers have with one another is analogous to the relationship between the Father and the Son. For instance, the Father and the Son are distinct persons with distinct roles, but are forever one. Only in the nature of the triune God can His unity and plurality be reconciled.<sup>29</sup> In the same way, believers never lose their distinct personhood, but are eternally and mystically united to one another through their union with Christ by faith. This is what the church sings about in the great hymn, *The Church’s One Foundation*, “Yet she on earth hath union with God the Three in One, and mystic sweet communion with those who’s rest is won.”<sup>30</sup>

In an astonishing prayer, Jesus desires that the interpersonal oneness belonging to all those united to Christ by faith may be of the same kind and character as the intra-trinitarian oneness. This is an expansion of what He prayed in John 17:11, “...That they may be one, even as We are one.” Lloyd-Jones builds a foundation to this important idea of the unity of the Godhead and its connection to the unity of all believers by noting four types of unity in the scriptures,

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<sup>28</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, 649.

<sup>29</sup> Gerald Bray traces the unity/plurality in God as a theme from Augustine to the reformers. See Gerald Lewis Bray, *The Doctrine of God*, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 153–224.

<sup>30</sup> Samuel Stone, “The Church’s One Foundation,” (No. 347) in *Trinity Hymnal* (Atlanta, GA and Philadelphia, PA: Great Commission Publications, 2000).

1. The unity of the Godhead – The Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.
2. The unity of the two natures of Christ in one person – the divine nature and the human nature, or the hypostatic union.
3. The unity of Christ and His people – the mystical union of Christ and the church.
4. The unity of Christians to one another.<sup>31</sup>

The unity of Christians to one another is to be understood as analogous to the other kinds of unity found in the scripture. Lloyd-Jones emphasizes that this last unity is the one most present in the mind of Christ the night before His crucifixion, but for believer's unity to be valued to the degree that Christ values their unity, their unity must be understood as grounded in the trinity,

And the point I would emphasize is that our Lord always, everywhere, teaches that this is to be thought of in terms analogous to the others which I've already mentioned. When we come to this, we must not forget the others; we must not suddenly become external, mechanical or organizational in our ideas and concepts. The unity which he prays for, for his people, is the unity which is analogous to that of the father, the son and the Holy Spirit - this mystical union between the blessed persons - and to the unity between Christ and his church.<sup>32</sup>

Though all human beings are made in the image of God and are therefore image-bearers, there remains something unique that all believers share as image-bearers in redemption. The image of God is redemptively restored in them because they are marked and sealed for final salvation. Robert Reymond explains the idea of the *imago dei* as a restorative grace,

More traditionally, reformed scholars, employing a “restoration hermeneutic,” have urged a personal/moral construction of the image. By determining precisely what it is that fallen man is *restored* to through Christ, by a direct “reading back” they have urged that the image of God is true righteousness, holiness, and a true knowledge of God. (Emphasis original)<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *Assurance*, 636-638.

<sup>32</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *Assurance*, 638.

<sup>33</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson, 2001), 428. During the Reformation, the Roman Catholic church made a distinction between the ‘likeness’ of God and the ‘image’ of God, so that in the fall man was deprived of certain moral qualities but

### Oneness in the Imago Dei

The implications of believers' restoration and sealing through Christ play out in their true, mystical unity after the pattern of the unity of the Godhead. In this sense, it may be said of Christians that they are not only made in the image of God, generally, but more specifically they are made, redeemed, and restored in the image of the trinity.

Donald Macleod helpfully expands on the theological foundation of the trinity as the grounds or, in Lloyd-Jones' language above, the analogy of believers' union with each other. He notes that the aseity of the triune God means,

That we are made for fellowship. This is probably the most important point of all. As bearers of God's image, we are made for with-ness. As God himself observed, it is not good for the man to be alone (Genesis 2:18). There is a social life in the godhead itself. The father, the son and the Holy Spirit live in community and fellowship. The same must be true of us. It is something we see exemplified beautifully in the life of Christ himself. He surrounded himself with people, both male and female. He related spontaneously and easily to children (Mark 10:14) He chose twelve simply to be with him. (Mark 3:14) He had an inner circle of three specially close friends (Peter, James and John), a home where he felt particularly welcome and secure (the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus at Bethany) and one disciple (John, the disciple whom Jesus loved) with whom he had a particularly close bond. All this is in marked contrast to many of the trends we see around us today, when so many people try to find fulfillment in independence, as if they could be themselves only by escaping from relationships...This is clearly at variance with the fact that we bear the image of God. We are made to live face to face with others of our own kind.<sup>34</sup>

When Jesus prays for the oneness of the believers in the same way as He and the Father are one, He is reflecting on the blessed union of the Holy Trinity. Trinitarian

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was never depraved in the whole man. The reformers rejected this distinction between "likeness" and "image" and could maintain that the image of God was lost in the fall in terms of original righteousness. For more, see Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 426, note 11.

<sup>34</sup> Donald Macleod, *Shared Life* (Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic Press, 1994), 47–48. It should be carefully noted that by the phrase, 'face to face with others of our own kind,' Macleod means other human beings, in reference to Adam naming the animals according to their kind, and not a sort of Kinism that others have advocated.

oneness represents the theological foundation for the oneness of God's people on the earth, even as they are one in heaven in the sense that believers' "with-ness" belongs to their nature as image bearers, since the image that believers bear is that of a triune God.

Human beings, especially redeemed human beings, should have a self-conceptualization that is grounded in the *imago dei*. That being true, it is biblically justifiable for believers to understand their unity with each other as an outworking of the *imago dei* in the community. The way that the spiritual reality of the unity of God's people gets enfolded may best be recognized in the life of the visible church.

#### **Section 4. Ephesians 4:1-6: The Ecclesiastical Context**

<sup>4</sup>*There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; <sup>5</sup>one Lord, one faith, one baptism, <sup>6</sup>one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.*

#### For All The Saints

Of all the churches in the New Testament, none receives as much attention as the church in Ephesus. From Paul's time spent there and the remarkable success of the gospel (Acts 19) to his passion filled departure speech (Acts. 20), to his letter to the church he planted there, all the way to the admonition given them in Revelation 2, Ephesians is delivered to us as a church from which we have much to learn.<sup>35</sup>

Ephesians may be cleanly divided into two halves. Chapters 1 through 3 are characterized by thanksgiving that the Apostle Paul feels and expresses toward God the Father and Christ the Son for his salvation and for that of his Ephesian brethren. He expressly gives thanks at both the beginning and the end of the first half of his letter.

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<sup>35</sup> Ephesians relies considerably on Colossians by sharing similar themes and structure. For instance, Ephesians shares 34% of its words with Colossians, while Colossians shares 26% of its words with Ephesians. For more on the similarities between Ephesians and Colossians see *Relation to Colossians and the Rest of the Pauline Corpus* in Andrew T. Lincoln and Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, v.42, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), xlvii–lviii.

Paul goes out of his way to deploy the phrase, “all the saints,” which helps tie the two prayers together while also indicating his awareness of the unity that the brethren both enjoy as a present, spiritual reality and should struggle to experience:

First Prayer: Ephesians 1:15-19	Second Prayer: Ephesians 3:14-19
<p>15 For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which <i>exists</i> among you and your love <b>for all the saints,</b></p> <p>16 do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention <i>of you</i> in my prayers;</p> <p>17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him.</p> <p>18 <i>I pray that</i> the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance <b>in the saints,</b></p> <p>19 and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.</p>	<p>14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,</p> <p>15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name,</p> <p>16 that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man,</p> <p>17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; <i>and</i> that you, being rooted and grounded in love,</p> <p>18 may be able to comprehend <b>with all the saints</b> what is the breadth and length and height and depth,</p> <p>19 and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.</p>

It is notable that in both these prayers Paul emphasizes the oneness of the believers, or their true, organic, and spiritual unity. In 1:15 he introduces the motivating factor for his unceasing prayer for the Ephesian church, εἰς πάντα τοὺς ἁγίους, “your love *for all the saints.*” In 1:18 he prays that they may come to understand the glory of Christ’s inheritance that is, ἐν τοῖς ἁγίοις, “*in the saints.*” In 3:18 he prays that God the Father would strengthen them so that Christ may dwell in their hearts and that with ἐν τοῖς ἁγίοις, “*all the saints*” they would comprehend the full measure of Christ’s love for them. Between these two expressions of thanksgiving is found what Paul calls “τὸ

ἀνεξιχνίαστον πλοῦτος τοῦ Χριστοῦ,” the unfathomable riches of Christ, in Ephesians 3:8. Importantly, Paul couches his expression of the unfathomable riches of Christ in the same context of πάντων ἁγίων “all the saints.” For Paul, the unity and catholicity of the church should be a cornerstone of the church’s self-conception because of the unfathomable riches of Christ’s redeeming grace. Specifically, he refers to himself as the least important or last (ἐλαχιστοτέρω) of all the saints. By identifying himself as both one of and the least of the brothers Paul is laying the foundation for the oneness doctrine of 4:1-16, for which he struggles and contends. Andrew Lincoln explains this point,

It is Paul’s distinctive contribution in the past that is in view. He is not being used as a model for the church’s missionary activity (contra Meyer, *Kirche und Mission*, 58-60), nor is the reference to his being the very least of all the saints (Vs.8) intended to make the point that his conversion is now paradigmatic for all believers (contra M.C. d Boer, “Images of Paul in the Post-Apostolic Period,” CBQ 42 [1980] 374). Instead, to remember the distinctive work of Paul is to remember the unity and catholicity of the church. As the previous pericope (2:11-22) demonstrated, the writer knows that ultimately the union of Jew and Gentile was affected by the reconciling work of Christ, so what are attributed to Paul are the insights into, and the proclamation of what had already been accomplished. His picture of Paul as the agent of an already-achieved unity gives no hint of the intense struggle over the issue with certain Jewish Christians, in which Paul was engaged until the end of his life. What is brought out, instead, by the stress on Paul as the recipient of revelation (vv 3,5) and on the distinctive gracing of his ministry (vv 2, 7, 8) is the authoritative and revelatory status of the apostolic tradition.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 172. Lincoln draws attention to the work of Christ to abolish the distinctions between Jew and Gentile believers in Ephesians 2:15-16, thus promoting their unity. For further reading on the “abolishing” doctrine see Ian Hamilton, *Ephesians*, The Lectio Continua Expository Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 81–89. Richard Sibbes’ predecessor, Paul Bayne, promotes the spiritual union of all believers in his abolish doctrine by noting, “Observe how straightly the faithful become combined. To be of one nation had been somewhat to be one kindred, to be one household; but the believing come to be one man, ‘all one in Christ Jesus.’ Till we all meet together into one perfect man, through the unity of faith. No conjunction in the world so coupled; the man and wife are near, even one flesh after some sort, but yet they are not one person any way. But the godly gathered, when they come to be in Christ, become one person with the rest of the faithful spiritually. See Thomas Goodwin and Paul Bayne, *Exposition of Ephesians: Book Two* ([n.p.]: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1959), 47–51.

### Already/Not-yet Tension of Unity

Paul's vision of the church is anchored in the already/not-yet tension of the church's unity. In Ephesian 4:1-16 the apostle turns his attention to the reality of the spiritual union that all believers enjoy, wishing for his readers to remember the unity and catholicity of the church.

Though the Greek structure of this section is quite undefined, it is clearly to be understood as among Paul's longest paraenesis. It contains a series of exhortations as his thought transitions from the doctrinal truths in 1-3. Andrew Lincoln may overstate the importance of the participial verbs in verses 2 and 3 as he points to them as the important feature indicating Paul's exhortative style.<sup>37</sup> More simply, it is clear from verse 1, Παρακαλῶ οὖν ὑμᾶς (I encourage you, then) that Paul aims to exhort the Ephesian church with imperative force toward a greater experiential unity based on the spiritual unity they already possess.

The exhortation could hardly be more forceful as Paul begins by imploring them to take the importance of their unity to heart as a matter of being faithful to Christ. For Paul, this is a first order issue. He simply cannot envision a Christianity where the brethren do not maintain a charitable spirit and mutual love toward one another. Given man's propensity toward disharmony and selfish interests, Paul feels the need to implore them toward unity as a matter of faithfulness to their calling in Christ. Things in the natural world always move from order to chaos, or from harmony to disharmony. Paul

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<sup>37</sup> Lincoln argues that the participial verbs found in 4:2b-3 are indicative of Paul's paraenetic style in this chapter. However, there is only one participial verb in each of these verses, which is hardly unusual, namely ἀνεχόμενοι (vs. 2) and σπουδάζοντες (vs. 3), See Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 224. Further comment on the Pauline use of participial verbs is beyond the purview of this project.

envisioning a reversal of the natural order by drawing sinners closer together as a centerpiece of biblical faithfulness. Παρακαλῶ οὖν ὑμᾶς ἐγὼ ὁ δέσμιος ἐν κυρίῳ ἀξίως περιπατῆσαι τῆς κλήσεως ἧς ἐκλήθητε. “Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called.” For Paul, to be a worthy Christian means, in part, to pursue the unity of the brethren already enjoyed as a spiritual reality. In verse 3, to emphasize their responsibility toward the brethren, he further exhorts them toward constant, intentional, and regular watchfulness in preserving the same spiritual unity that he wants them to know experientially.

This unity of the brethren, however, should not be reduced to a mythical ideal of removing all ecclesiastical boundaries around which believers of various theological persuasions gather. It is the invisible church that is truly and spiritually one, unbreakably so, because Christ unites Himself to her.<sup>38</sup> The visible church, organized by local congregations and denominations around doctrinal alignment, does no harm to the reality of the believer’s spiritual union. Rather, we may consider the reality of the invisible church’s spiritual unity as the grounds for the pursuit of visible church’s relational unity. William Hendriksen considers this tension between unity as a present reality spiritually and unity as something to preserve in the Spirit and concludes that Paul’s meaning is, “unity amid diversity and growth into Christ.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> In Ephesians 5:22-33, Paul takes the point further by arguing that, although a mystery, the relationship between husband and wife is likened to the relationship between Christ and the church. The point he makes is that the people of God are united together with Christ already in a spiritual reality and as a corporate, organic body. For further discussion on the union with Christ and the church as it relates to the mystery of the gospel, see John Calvin, *Ephesians*, Calvin’s Commentaries (Wilmington, DE: Associated Publishers and Authors), 324-326.

<sup>39</sup> Hendriksen, *Ephesians*, 182.

### The Creedal Formula

On what, then, does the Apostle Paul base his ideal of preserving the unity of the Spirit (vs. 3)? The answer may be found in the seven spiritual realities of verses 4-6 that together form the cornerstone of actual relational unity within the local church and includes the possibility of cross-fraternity unity, indicating Paul's desire that unity be more than an idea or an unknowable concept that dwells only in spiritual reality and has no real effect on Christian living. They all center on the idea of oneness. ἐν σῶμα καὶ ἐν πνεῦμα, καθὼς καὶ ἐκλήθητε ἐν μιᾷ ἐλπίδι τῆς κλήσεως ὑμῶν· **5** εἷς κύριος, μία πίστις, ἐν βάπτισμα, **6** εἷς θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ πάντων, ὁ ἐπὶ πάντων καὶ διὰ πάντων καὶ ἐν πᾶσιν.

Original	Author's Translation
ἐν σῶμα (Neuter)	One body/flesh
ἐν πνεῦμα (Neuter)	One spirit
μιᾷ ἐλπίδι τῆς κλήσεως ὑμῶν (Feminine)	One hope [of] your calling
εἷς κύριος (Masculine)	One Lord
μία πίστις (Feminine)	One faith
ἐν βάπτισμα (Neuter)	One baptism
εἷς θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ πάντων (Masculine)	One God and father [of] all

Because there is no main verb in verses 4-6, and because the number “one” is recycled using three different genders, this sentence should be understood as an early Christian creed. Verses 4-6 are a stand-alone statement intended for ready memorization in the early church. This creedal formula of oneness has a Hellenistic Jewish background that served as an important formula by which Jewish unity was theoretically, at least,

maintained during the diaspora. Here, Paul brings that formula to bear on the New Testament Jewish-Gentile church, hoping to draw out an ecclesiastical unity even greater than that which helped coalesce the diaspora Jews. Creeds serve to promote the unity of the church by their simple declarative statements of shared belief. They help a diverse body of believers, with various backgrounds, assumptions, and experiences to be tied together in the purity of a baseline truth. In his book on creeds and confessions, Chad Van Dixhoorn notes succinctly, “The desire to state truth openly is a basic Christian instinct.”<sup>40</sup>

Paul is moved by this instinct and exhorts the Ephesians to preserve the unity of the spirit (vs. 3) in the bond of peace. It should not surprise us, then, that upon introducing the creedal formula of verses 4-6 he highlights that there is only one Spirit, meaning one Holy Spirit that has united them already.

United in Body. Paul has already introduced the importance of  $\sigma\omega\mu\alpha$  in 1:23, referring to the church as the body of Christ.  $\sigma\omega\mu\alpha$  can be translated either ‘body’ or ‘flesh,’ but translators uniformly agree that ‘body’ is the right translation in both chapters 1 and 4 because the context in each deals with many parts brought together to form a whole, like that of a physical body. Paul’s emphasis on the oneness of the body confirms that unity amid diversity is the biblical ideal. Paul’s exhortation toward Christian unity

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<sup>40</sup> Chad B. Van Dixhoorn, ed., *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms: A Reader’s Edition* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 7. For more on the creedal formula of Ephesians 4:4-6 see Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 255. Andrew Lincoln sees a partial creedal formula in verses 4-6, “There is discussion whether and to what extent traditional creedal formulations are quoted in vv 4-6. The oneness of the basic elements of the faith is set out in a series of acclamations, which at the same time serve as reminders to the readers of what they already know. Despite the sevenfold nature of these acclamations, it is highly unlikely that vv 4-6 as a whole are a confessional or hymn composed by the author or that they constituted an earlier unit which has simply been incorporated here...it is more likely that behind the passage lie one or two pieces of creedal material that the writer has taken up his own rhetorical stress on unity. See Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 228.

among Christian diversity is as much a plea as it is a declaration. He echoes the sentiment in 4:16, ἐξ οὗ πᾶν τὸ σῶμα συναρμολογούμενον καὶ συμβιβασζόμενον διὰ πάσης ἀφῆς τῆς ἐπιχορηγίας κατ' ἐνέργειαν ἐν μέτρῳ ἐνὸς ἐκάστου μέρους τὴν αὐξησιν τοῦ σώματος ποιεῖται εἰς οἰκοδομὴν ἑαυτοῦ ἐν ἀγάπῃ. Here, Paul emphasizes the reality of their oneness while also pressing them to understand they must preserve the unity of the Spirit (4:3) as a body so that each part can be built up.

United in Spirit. Paul reaches back to his earlier remarks in 2:18 about Jews and Gentiles having equal access in one Spirit (πνεῦμα) to God the Father, “for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.” There, he deploys the language of the temple, where access to God was easily envisioned, especially by the Jewish believers. Access to the Father is guaranteed to Jews and Gentiles who trust in Christ because it is the Spirit that grants it. But the point of 2:18 is that access to the living God belongs to all believers because through the Spirit all believers are united under Christ. In 4:4, Paul encourages the Ephesian church that their common sense of belonging should be anchored by the sealing grace of Christ because they have all been called to a single hope.

United in Hope. ἐλπίδι in its various declensions is deployed 112 times in the Pauline corpus, carrying a common meaning of looking forward with confidence to greater things yet to come. Paul uses the term most often in Romans, but it is only in Ephesians that he ties together the believers' hope (ἐλπίδι) with his calling (κλήσεως). Four times in Ephesians the word ἐλπίδι is used, twice immediately with κλήσεως (1:18 and 4:4). By assuring his readers that the hope they all enjoy is according to their

effectual calling (τῆς κλήσεως) in Christ and sealed in the Holy Spirit, Paul is advancing the notion of their oneness having been a true spiritual reality.

United in Christ. In verse 5 Paul picks up the tempo of his creedal exhortation by saying only, εἰς κύριος. This may be considered a blanket statement, under which all other expressions of their unity can be summarized. Above all things, because of the sin-conquering, division-ruining work of the Lord, the Ephesian believers are united under Him.<sup>41</sup> Christ is here referred to as κύριος, which assigns Him authority and demands humble submission. For Paul, the idea of Jesus as κύριος is a warm expression. Earlier in Ephesians (4:1) he referred to himself as prisoner to the κύριος, having submitted his life to the glorious grace of the Son. The same κύριος who saves us also perfects us and unites all believers together.

United in Faith. Πίστις is the most common word for faith in the New Testament, but in Ephesians it is found in both its noun and verbal form. The phrase μία πίστις possibly refers to the faith that a person owns, as in “your faith” or “my faith.” In that case, Paul would be encouraging them that they are united because they all place their trust in Christ for salvation. The other option is that πίστις refers to the body of doctrine that unites them. Because there is no definite article in verse 5, it may be difficult to know with certainty. However, the latter option is preferred when we allow 4:13 to inform our exegesis. μέχρι καταστήσωμεν οἱ πάντες εἰς τὴν ἐνότητα τῆς πίστεως καὶ τῆς ἐπιγνώσεως τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ, εἰς ἄνδρα τέλειον, εἰς μέτρον ἡλικίας τοῦ πληρώματος

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<sup>41</sup> Earlier in Ephesians, Paul had labored to introduce the doctrine of the believer’s *union with Christ*. He uses the phrases “In Christ,” “in Him,” or “in the heavenly places in Christ” nine times in the opening fourteen verses of Ephesians. This doctrine of *union with Christ* helps give definition to Paul’s doctrine of the covenant and helps inform his meaning of ‘God and Father of all’ in 4:6. For more on Paul’s doctrine of union with Christ see Richard D. Phillips, *Chosen in Christ: The Glory of Grace in Ephesians 1* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 23–27. See also Calvin, *Ephesians*, 197–200.

τοῦ Χριστοῦ. Here, the definite article τῆς indicates that the unity of the believers is based on the body of doctrine that Paul calls, τῆς πίστεως: the faith.

Considering how Paul constructs this creedal formula, we are getting closer to concluding that the spiritual unity of believers may be truly experienced when they are committed to the purity of a body of doctrine delivered to the saints.

United in Baptism. That baptism is a unifying rite may be deduced from the universality of its application. Paul is not commenting on a particular mode of baptism, nor even, perhaps to the chagrin of many, is he commenting on the proper recipients of baptism, but rather highlighting the sacrament as the common testimony of all obedient Christians.<sup>42</sup> All members of the congregation are baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, thus uniting them under the banner of Christ. Calvin says,

This does not mean that Christian baptism is not to be administered more than once, but that one baptism is common to all; so that, by means of it, we begin to form one body and one soul. But if that argument has any force, a much stronger one will be founded on the truth that the Father, and Son and the Spirit are one God; for it is one baptism, which is celebrated in the name of the Three Persons.<sup>43</sup>

United in God the Father. The final entry of the creedal formula is a grand statement, that all believes are united because there is one θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ πάντων: God

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<sup>42</sup> We may wonder why Paul refers only to one sacrament, and not the other, as well. Hendriksen provides an answer when he quotes Lenski approvingly, “The correct answer is that the *Una Sancta* (one sacrament) includes also a host of babes and children, none of whom are able to receive the Lord’s Supper.” By including only baptism in the creedal formula, Paul ensures that all members of the church are included in the blessing of unity. See footnote 102 in Hendriksen, *Ephesians*, 187. Further comment on the proper recipients of baptism is beyond the purview of this project. An additional point of disagreement among scholars over the phrase ἐν βάπτισμα centers on what kind of baptism Paul has in mind. Some argue that he means baptism in the Spirit. See Thielman *Ephesians*, 258. However, the preponderance of scholarship agrees with the opinion of this project, that ἐν βάπτισμα refers to the water baptism applied to every member of the church.

<sup>43</sup> Calvin, *Ephesians*, 269. It should be noted that despite the appearance of this quote, Calvin does not believe in baptism being administered more than once. His point in the Ephesians commentary is that Paul’s point has nothing at all to do with disputations over mode and practice of baptism, but that baptism into the name of the triune God is a unifying mark of faith and faithfulness in the church.

and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (vs. 6). Paul wants to ground his readers, even as he exhorts them to preserve the unity of the Spirit they already enjoy, by assuring them of the absolute sovereignty of the God who saved them. Already in Ephesians, the Apostle has referred to God as the “God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.” (1:3). He has introduced God as the predestinating, adopting God who has lavished on His people the riches of His grace (1:5-7). Now, Paul takes his readers to new heights by introducing the supremacy of God the Father as One who is omnipresent and perfectly sovereign. If all things are held together by the One God and Father of all, and He has redeemed His church through the blood of His Son, then those who have been redeemed are surely held together in precious unity with Him and with each other.

The totality of the spiritual realities from the Ephesian creedal formula provides a framework for relational unity within the church and the connection of purity to unity. Liberal theologians make a deadly flaw in their call for unity because their ecumenism has a vacuous foundation devoid of precise doctrine. What stands out is the importance of doctrinal commitment to a set of theological propositions for there to be experiential unity among the brethren. This is what liberal theologians miss in their calls for unity. Where there is no doctrinal agreement on essential things, or little acknowledgement of the distinctiveness of the Christian faith, there can be only a thin unity. In 2006, the mainline Presbyterian Church (USA) produced a multi-year report on the subject of peace, purity and unity of the church, which began with a series of theological reflections. Among them was that they, along with Jews and Muslims, were the children

of Abraham and so found it important to pray to the God of Abraham for unity and purity, both in the church and the world.<sup>44</sup>

While it is theologically accurate for Christians to view themselves as the descendants of Abraham, as Paul does in Galatians 3:29, it is classic liberal ecumenism to conflate the three great religions of the world into a single unified religious family, thus removing Christian distinctives, and then hope for purity and unity among them. A quest for spiritual or religious unity among those who do not share an adherence to basic Christian doctrine is quite nonsensical.

### **Section 5. Psalm 133: The Hebraic Context**

<sup>1</sup>Behold, how good and how pleasant it is For brothers to dwell together in unity! <sup>2</sup>It is like the precious oil upon the head, Coming down upon the beard, *Even* Aaron's beard, Coming down upon the edge of his robes. <sup>3</sup>It is like the dew of Hermon Coming down upon the mountains of Zion; For there the LORD commanded the blessing—life forever.

There is something profoundly Jewish about Psalm 133. Though it is impossible to know for certain, it is likely, and certainly imaginable, that the Apostle Paul's ideas of the purity and unity of the church were conditioned by his knowledge of Psalm 133. Despite its brevity, there are few places in the Old Testament that so clearly and powerfully display God's heart for the oneness of His people.

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<sup>44</sup> *Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church* (Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2006), 9. [https://www.pcusa.org/site\\_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/peace-unity-purity-final-report-revised-english.pdf](https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/peace-unity-purity-final-report-revised-english.pdf). The task force calls for faith, hope and love as an instrument of messianic peace without giving clear definitions of love based on the exclusivity of Christ's redeeming love through His atoning sacrifice. Though the Task Force makes reference to the Westminster Confession of Faith, there is little to no reference to the Standards to support the argument toward Christian unity. Short of the Confession, at very least one might have hoped the Task Force to promote the unifying fundamentals of evangelism as described in the Auburn Affirmation of 1923. These, too, are absent from the work of the Task Force.

The Psalms of Ascents (120-134) depict the glory and suffering of God's people on the journey to Jerusalem to celebrate the festivals.<sup>45</sup> They may be considered a handmaid to discipleship because of the way they take the reader through the full array of Christian experience. The whole story of Israel was remembered in these festivals, both bad and good.<sup>46</sup> Suffering and glory have a unique way of drawing a people together based on shared history and shared experiences. Psalm 133 captures that motif.

The Psalms of Ascents recall Israel's history and God's faithfulness in their history. This history is filled with violence, betrayal, and conflict: anything but sweet unity. In Genesis, Cain killed his brother. In Exodus the people grumbled against the Lord's anointed. In Numbers, Korah rebelled against Moses and stirred dissent. In Joshua, Achan withheld valuable goods from Israel's victory over Jericho, bringing divine curse on the whole community. In 2 Kings, Solomon's heart went after foreign women and brought the dividing sword of God's justice to the house of David forevermore. Israel's history, when recounted, was troubling for any Hebrew who thought honestly about it. When the people journeyed up to Jerusalem for the feast, they confronted the reality of their past as much as anything else.

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<sup>45</sup> Robert Godfrey provides a helpful overview of each of the five books of the Psalms and how they related to each other. Among the values in Godfrey's approach is that he helpfully notes the themes common to each book. He argues the primary theme of book 5 (107-150) is that of praise and celebration for the King's salvation. See W. Robert Godfrey, *Learning to Love the Psalms* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2017), 195–199.

<sup>46</sup> Leviticus 23 provides a succinct description of each of the seven major festivals. For an excellent summary of them and the purpose of their institution see Philip H. Eveson, *The Beauty of Holiness: Leviticus Simply Explained*, Welwyn Commentary Series (Darlington, England; Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 2007), 311–332.

The unity they sang about in Psalm 133 was likely more aspirational than it was experiential.<sup>47</sup> They were singing of an objective truth: It is good and pleasant for the brothers to dwell together in unity.

Ps. 133	Hebrew (excluding the superscript)	Author's Translation
Verse 1	הִגֵּה מֵה־טוֹב וּמֵה־נְעִים וְשָׁבַת אֶחָיִם גַּם־יַחַד	Behold! How good and how pleasant/delightful [for] brethren [to] dwell/abide also together.
Verse 2	כַּשֶּׁמֶן הַטּוֹב עַל־הָרֹאשׁ יֵרֵד עַל־הַזָּקָן וְעַל־הַזָּקָן אֶת־הַרְוֵה עַל־פִּי מְדוּתָיו	[it is like] good oil on the head, running down on the beard, Aaron's beard, running down beyond the edge of his garments.
Verse 3	כְּטֶל־הַרְמוֹן שִׁירֵד עַל־הַרְבֵּי צִיּוֹן כִּי נִשְׁמוּ צִנְהָ גִּהְוָה אֶת־הַבְּרָכָה חַיִּים עַד־עוֹלָם	[it is like] dew of Hermon running down on the mountains of Zion. Because there Yahweh commanded the blessing: life everlasting.

The Psalm begins with a summons, **הִגֵּה** (Hinneh), meaning “behold” or “look.” It appears over a thousand times in the Old Testament and virtually always carries a sense of urgency.<sup>48</sup> The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament describes **הִגֵּה** as “An interjection demanding attention.”<sup>49</sup> There is an important truth to be grasped, as though the original singers aimed to alert one another of the importance of their song.

Though the word for unity does not appear in the original, it is captured by the phrase, **גַּם־יַחַד**, “also together.” The beauty and pleasantness of the unity of the brethren

<sup>47</sup> This is not to suggest they could not experience any unity at all. Rather, Psalm 133 seems to fit a more hopeful tone when Psalms 132 and 133 are considered together. James Hamilton argues this point, “Reflection on these past difficulties between brothers makes the unity between brothers celebrated in Psalm 133 seem like something to be hope for in the age to come, enjoyed in the present only as an anticipation of a better day. With Psalm 133 immediately following the promise of a horn that will sprout for David in 132:17, a future king from David's line, the arrangement suggests that this unity will characterize the reign of the son of David.” See James M. Hamilton, *Psalms Two Volume Set*, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021), 424–425.

<sup>48</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Hebrew taken from *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Dt. Bibelges, 1997).

<sup>49</sup> Carl Philip Weber, “510 הִגֵּה,” ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999), 220.

would have been like a balm to their weary souls. Allen Ross proposes a chiastic structure to Psalm 133, centering on Aaron's ministry,<sup>50</sup>

A: Blessing  
     B: Comparison with oil  
         **C: Aaron's ministry**  
     B<sup>1</sup>: Comparison with water  
 A<sup>1</sup>: Blessing.

The three verses of Psalm 133 introduce the concept of brotherly unity and then liken that unity to the anointing of Israel's high priest and water on the land under the blessing of God, a blessing that points beyond itself to everlasting life.

Aaron served as a type and symbol of Christ, specifically in his ministry as the original high priest and mediatorial role in the Old Covenant. As high priest, Aaron alone was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16), with each successive high priest enjoying the same privilege. The author to the Hebrews (Heb. 8:1-4) draws the priestly connection to Christ in saying that Christ entered the true and better sanctuary, having made a truer and better sacrifice, "Now the main point in what has been said *is this*: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens,<sup>2</sup> a minister in the sanctuary and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man. <sup>3</sup>For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices; so it is necessary that this *high priest* also have something to offer. <sup>4</sup>Now if He were on earth, He would not be a priest at all, since there are those who offer the gifts according to the Law."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms (90–150)*, vol. 3, Kregel Exegetical Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2016), 747. See also, Hamilton, *Psalms*, 423.

<sup>51</sup> The primary point with respect to priesthood in Hebrews is that Jesus is a high priest in the order of Melchizedek, drawn especially from Psalm 110 and Genesis 14. However, our purpose is to note that Jesus represents the fulfillment of the Aaronic priesthood, especially as the author draws a contrast between the Levitical priesthood of the priesthood of Christ in Hebrews 8. For fuller discussion see

In Psalm 133, David is drawing on the importance of Aaron for the religious psyche of the people, placing Aaron at the center of the chiasmic structure of the poem. Everything about the poem revolves around the religious beauty and national importance of Aaron, the high priest.

### Both Good *and* Pleasant

Dwelling in unity with the brothers is described as טוב (good) and נעים (pleasant). The use of טוב recalls God's creative activity in Genesis 1, where each day of creation was said to be טוב. In deploying the concept טוב in Psalm 133, David points to a new creation, a new people created and united under the same God. There is an objective goodness to the unity of the people, which in turn produces a subjective pleasantness of experience. The word נעים is used only thirteen times in the Old Testament to describe the delightfulness or loveliness of a thing, even describing the sweet sound of pleasant music.

The OT also uses *nā'ēm* and its derivatives to characterize various concrete terms as, for example, the taste of bread (Prov 9:17), location of ground (Ps 16:6), and music of the lyre (Ps 81:2)... Of special note are those passages where the root is used to describe God or his name. Psalm 135:3 (AV) declares, "Sing praises unto his name; for it is pleasant" (*nā'im*; cf. RSV "sing. to his name, for he is gracious!")<sup>52</sup>

This is the experience of God's people when they dwell in the goodness of God's designed unity. That the unity of God's people is both good and pleasant is not to be overlooked. It is possible for a thing to be either good or pleasant, but not the other. For

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William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1 - 8*, Word Biblical Commentary. ed, David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, Vol. 47A. (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2009), 198–204.

<sup>52</sup> Marvin R. Wilson, "1384 נעים," ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999), 585.

instance, discipline is good but is not pleasant for the time a person endures it (Heb. 12:1). On the other hand, a particular sin may be pleasant, even delightful, as the tree appeared to Eve in Genesis 3, but it was not good to indulge. This is the deceit of sin (Heb. 11:25-26). In Psalm 133, David takes extra caution to note that the unity of the brethren is *both* good and pleasant.

### Oil Upon Aaron's Robe

There are two vibrant metaphors likened to the sweetness of unity. First, unity is like precious oil on the head, the beard, like Aaron's beard, and running to the edge of his robes. David's intent is to communicate the idea of abundant blessing. Oil, pressed from the olive, was a precious commodity in the life of Old Testament Israel. It was used for medicinal purposes to treat and protect the skin, but it was also an act of hospitality to greet guests at one's home by soothing their bodies with the pouring of oil on their feet and on their head. Most importantly, oil was used as the anointing agent in religious ceremonies.

David may be alluding to Aaron's anointing in Leviticus 8:6-11, "6Then Moses had Aaron and his sons come near and washed them with water.<sup>7</sup>He put the tunic on him and girded him with the sash, and clothed him with the robe and put the ephod on him; and he girded him with the artistic band of the ephod, with which he tied *it* to him.<sup>8</sup>He then placed the breastpiece on him, and in the breastpiece he put the Urim and the Thummim.<sup>9</sup>He also placed the turban on his head, and on the turban, at its front, he placed the golden plate, the holy crown, just as the LORD had commanded Moses.<sup>10</sup>Moses then took the anointing oil and anointed the tabernacle and all that was in it, and consecrated them.<sup>11</sup>He sprinkled some of it on the altar seven times and anointed the altar

and all its utensils, and the basin and its stand, to consecrate them.<sup>12</sup>Then he poured some of the anointing oil on Aaron's head and anointed him, to consecrate him."

The Levitical context of oil-anointing centers on the presence of God among His people in a cultic rite. Leviticus 8 describes in graphic detail how the entirety of the temple was to be anointed with oil, indicating God's presence in the worship and sacrificial rite. The whole assembly was represented by the high priest in this rite, which played a key role in the Hebraic self-conception and worship. As a way of inspiring Israel toward something better than their current experience, David imports the imagery of the oil-anointing of Aaron into Psalm 133 and points to the beauty of godly unity under the blessing of God. The pleasant fragrance of the oil would have immediately recalled the experience of being under the blessing of God's special care.

Aaron's robe was a key piece of the Levitical sacrificial system. He was to wear the robe as he performed his duties, which included massive amounts of bloodshed. It is not hard to imagine the extreme and foul stench that attended the sacrifices. Oil that pours down Aaron's head and beard, all the way to the edges of his robe indicates the contrast between unpleasantness and pleasantness. The oil overcomes the stench of the system and is meant to point to things that are pleasant and delightful. It is the sweet fragrance of holiness that rises from a people in godly unity. Ligon Duncan explains,

The priest was in some dirty and smelly business but that oil, which anointed his head, flowed down the side and around even his collars touching his garments, was filled with a pungent, pleasing aroma that countered the other displeasing aromas which would have surrounded him in the context of that sacrificial system.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ligon Duncan, *The Joy of Unity: Psalm 133:1-3*. Sermon preached at First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi on June 12, 2012, accessed May 22, 2023. [www.fpcjackson.org/resources-library/sermons/the-joy-of-unity/](http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources-library/sermons/the-joy-of-unity/).

For all the pleasantness of the aroma, when Aaron was anointed with oil it was not simply a cleansing ritual, however. The anointing of the oil symbolized a consecration or setting apart for special and sanctified purposes. It was meant to set him apart from all others because God had appointed him to special service in the Kingdom. Aaron's work and his oil-anointment symbolizes the anointing work of the Holy Spirit in sanctifying a people for God's holy use. This is where the illustration ties into the goodness and pleasantness of Christian unity.

Aaron's robe included the names of the tribes of Israel whom he was representing, six names on each shoulder. His chest plate contained twelve stones, one for each of the tribes. These were close to his heart, symbolizing both the weight of his duties to represent them before God, and the love with which God loved them as their sins were being atoned for. The oil that ran down all the way to the edges of Aaron's robe also ran over the names of all the people in a dramatic illustration of their unity under the Godhead having been purified by sacrificial rite. The robe, the oil, the names of the tribes and the sacrificial administration of Aaron would have all conspired to bring the people to a sense of the beauty of both holiness and unity.

Today, the Holy Spirit empowers the believer to live worthily of his calling, which includes the pursuit of Spirit-wrought unity. The names of God's people are written on the heart of God. They are in the Lamb's book of life (Revelation 21:7), symbolizing that their unity has been purchased by Christ and remains sealed by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is Christ that carries the names of His people on His own heart and therefore binds them as one. The abundant blessing of God's people united

together under the grace of the Holy Spirit is pictured in the oil running down to the edge of Aaron's robe.

#### Dew From Mt. Hermon

The second illustration of the blessing of Godly unity is that of the dew that runs down from Hermon to the mountains of Zion. (Vs. 3) The verb יָרַד ties verses 2 and 3 together because it appears in both to describe the 'coming down' or the 'running down.' As the oil runs down (יָרַד) Aaron's head, beard and robe, so the dew runs down (יָרַד) from Mt. Hermon. A difference may be detected, however, in the sense of its use in verse 3. Whereas in verse 2 the running down indicates the abundance of blessing, the running down in verse 3 indicates the source of blessing.

Mt. Hermon is the source of this blessing. In an arid climate like Israel, the evening dew was crucial to the land's survival. Nancy deClaissé-Walford explains the significance of the dew for the dry land,

Mt. Hermon, located some 125 miles north of Jerusalem, was known for its abundant dew. And in Palestine, which saw little rainfall between the months of April and October, dew was an important commodity. Without the nightly accumulation of dew, the land would be parched and dry for many months out of the year. In Psalm 133, the dew that soothes and refreshes the land comes down on Mount Zion; and Jerusalem, the center of worship for ancient Israel, is soothed and refreshed.<sup>54</sup>

Mt. Hermon, on the other hand, was known for its lushness and abundant precipitation. Its 9,000-foot peak produced dew, rain and snow that provided life for the surrounding region as it descended. The life-sustaining dew that runs down from Hermon draws our attention to the source of the blessing of our unity. Believers today

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<sup>54</sup> Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 939.

come into the fellowship of the triune God from many backgrounds and cultures, just as Jesus prayed in John 17. The picture of heaven in Revelation reveals that God’s people who will be gathered around the heavenly throne in eternal worship represent every tribe, tongue, people, and nation (Rev. 7:9). It delights the living God to bring such a diverse people together as a single body in the work of His new creation. Just as Mt. Hermon is the source of the dew that sustains the land, so the living God is the source of the unity that delights the church.<sup>55</sup>

The dew runs down from Hermon and comes upon the mountains of Zion. This is to be taken hypothetically, as Mt. Zion is well over one hundred miles to the south of Hermon. It is unlikely that dew would transport so far or in such a direction.<sup>56</sup> Mt. Zion was the location of worship for God’s people in the days of David and is frequently used synonymously with Jerusalem.<sup>57</sup> It was the place where God communed with His people, where the people went to find His blessing. When the people gathered in Jerusalem for the feasts and festivals that God appointed, they were gathering as a family tied together by the blessing of God’s presence among them.

That the blessing of God’s people in unity is tied to the blessing of God’s presence among them may be deduced from the final clause of the Psalm, “For there the

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<sup>55</sup> For helpful pastoral implications of the Hermon-Source motif of Psalm 133 see David Strain, *Blessed Unity*, Sermon preached at First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi on November 7, 2021, accessed May 22, 2023. <https://fpcjackson.org/resource-library/sermons/blessed-unity/>

<sup>56</sup> Allen Ross addresses this textual difficulty in some detail, “This 9,000 foot mountain is in the far north of the land in an area that is known for its moist air, rain, and in the colder season, snow. And the benefit of this much moisture in the air is lush greenery. The problem with this simile if read in a straightforward manner is that the dew of that mountain does not actually descend on Mount Zion, which is Jerusalem, well over a hundred miles to the south. Some scholars try to alleviate the difficulty by changing the text from “Zion” (יִצְיָ) to “Iyon” (יִצְיָ), a place in the foothills of Mount Hermon. There is a similarity between the initial letters (a ö for Zion, and ò for Iyon); but there is no real support for this suggestion. A better proposal is to take the line as hypothetical; so the NIV translates it as: “It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion.”” See Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 745–752.

<sup>57</sup> There are one hundred fifty two occasions in the Old Testament where Zion is synonymously used as Jerusalem, thirty-nine of which occur in the book of Psalms.

Lord commanded the blessing.” **שָׁם** (there) refers back to Zion, which captures the imagination of the pilgrims reciting this poem on their way to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the place where God commands the blessing. Here, the blessing of unity in verse 1 is summarily comprehended in verse 3 as **עֲדֵי־הָעוֹלָם**, “life everlasting.” The unity of God’s people in this poem is inseparably tied to the priesthood of Aaron, the first high priest and mediator of the Old Covenant sacrificial system. Aaron was the symbol of unity and a type of Christ. One cannot separate the purifying grace of the sacrificial system under Aaron’s administration from the unity of the people that the Aaronic priesthood created. The consistent testimony of the scriptures is that unity of the brethren is not possible without the purity of the brethren, and the purity of the brethren always advances their unity.

Psalm 133 is aspirational in nature. It ties the people of God together in a kind of unity that is already enjoyed in the truest, spiritual sense but is not yet experienced in the fullest way. For today’s believer, the good and pleasant gift of Christian unity is also aspirational, yet for us, because of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit pictured in the oil-anointing, there is a fuller and richer unity under the Lordship of Christ, our great High Priest. When the PCA’s General Assembly sings Psalm 133 to conclude the year’s business, she is celebrating a real, experienced unity, but it is a unity in seed form. A day is coming when all divisions will be finally done away with, and the unity of the invisible church will be made visible. Then, the Lord will command the blessing of everlasting life in the experience of Christian oneness. The true beauty of oneness stems from unity purchased in Christ and is best known in the context of the covenant community freed the

stain of sin. Christian experience, however, painfully reminds us again that that day is not yet here.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the eschatological, teleological, trinitarian, ecclesiastical, and Hebraic, contexts of the preceding scriptural references, we can conclude that the reality of believers' spiritual union is anchored in heaven, secured in Christ and is characterized by the mystical, intra-trinitarian unity of the Godhead. There is an already / not-yet motif detectable in the biblical idea of true unity in Christ. That is, believers already possess the truest unity possible because they are united under Christ, but the presence of sin has left the experience of that unity not-yet realized in this life. We can also conclude that the biblical witness is that neither purity nor unity of the church can be sacrificed for the sake of one another. Rather, unity is not possible without purity and purity always leads to the experience of unity.

The *eschatological context* of Jesus' prayer for the unity of His chosen people in John 17:1-2 shows that God the Father granted Christ the Son His divine authority, for the hour had now come, pointing to His cross-work. The authority given to Jesus on the basis of His atoning sacrifice finally and definitively resulted in the inheritance of eternal life to those so appointed. The arrival of the messianic hour meant that Jesus' prayer for the salvation and mystic union of His sheep was guaranteed to be answered, for it was anchored in the plan of redemption.

John 17:13-21 is a key passage connecting the purity of the church to the unity of the church. The end goal of God's sanctifying work through His word is that a new people might be created under the banner of Christ. This is the *teleological context* of

Jesus' prayer. In those verses, Jesus prayed four times (vs. 13, 14, 17, 19) that His disciples would be well acquainted with the Word of truth resulting in their being made one (vs. 21). The Word of truth creates a new people who are unified after the pattern of the trinity of God and united together as one.

In John 17:21-24 Jesus revealed the *Trinitarian context* of His prayer for His disciples. Jesus' intimate prayer to His Father showed that His desire for the disciples' oneness is of the same kind and character of the oneness of the trinity. All believers are sealed for the day of Christ in mystic union on the pattern of the unity of the Godhead. Trinitarian oneness represents the theological foundation for the oneness of God's people in both spiritual reality and blessed experience.

The *ecclesiastical context* for the purity and unity of God's people is best expressed in Ephesians 4. There, the Apostle Paul expressed in creedal formula the oneness of believers, that they are united in seven ways: one body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father. This unity, though a spiritual reality, is best experienced through a shared commitment to a body of doctrine. The creedal formula of Ephesians 4:6-8 provides a framework for relational unity within the church and helps connect purity to unity insofar as believers may experience the pleasures of union.

The New Testament authors did not invent the idea of blessed unity. Rather, they inherited an *Hebraic concept* of the blessing of unity. The beauty and pleasantness of God's people dwelling in unity was symbolically pictured in the oil that ran over the names of all the tribes of Israel, from Aaron's beard to the edge of his robe. The word picture highlighted that all the people who belong to God by faith are under the blessing

of God's unifying grace. This unifying grace is both morally good and experientially pleasant in the lives of God's people. The New Testament authors imported that idea to the church in the New Covenant as a way of establishing a good and pleasant community.

When Presbyterians vow to promote the peace, purity and unity of the church, they are vowing to uphold the bonds of peace that already exist in spiritual reality while also pursuing the expression of the purity and unity of the local church and the denomination to whom they are accountable. It is a grave error to pursue either the purity of the church without emphasizing her unity, or to promote her unity without antecedent commitment to purity of doctrine. If the PCA is to forge a healthy denomination for the rising generation, she must resolutely commit to both the purity and unity of the church. Anything short would represent less than biblical ideals and would surely result in a failed Presbyterianism.

Today's conservative Presbyterians must again commit to the dual importance of the purity and unity of the church because one cannot ever be sacrificed for the sake of the other. This is the biblical witness and deserves the fullest attention of contemporary Presbyterian churchmen.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONTEMPORARY THOUGHT ON THE STRUGGLE FOR THE PURITY AND UNITY OF THE CHURCH

Presbyterians have a unique history in their pursuit of the purity and unity of the church, but Presbyterians are not alone in the pursuit. Pastors and scholars across the theological spectrum have understood that the purity and unity of the church is a central piece to the mission. Peter Leithart observes that the 1990's witnessed a renewed interest in the doctrine of the unity of the church, with special interest in how unity plays out across denominations and doctrinal lines.<sup>1</sup> Even within the reformed community, a well-articulated togetherness has been enormously popular. The current generation has an itch for a meaningful and enduring togetherness.<sup>2</sup> There is a weariness of sectarianism. As well there should be. A study of global Christianity from 1970-2020 revealed the existence of over seven hundred denominations around the world.<sup>3</sup> It is no wonder contemporary evangelicals wish to see a greater purity of the church as marked by unity. The question is, how does the church approach the dilemma?

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Leithart, "Denomination and Church," *First Things* (blog), <http://www.firstthings.com/article/1992/10/denomination-and-church>, accessed May 12, 2023. Leithart ties late 20<sup>th</sup> century resurgence of interest in ecumenism to the rise of evangelicalism.

<sup>2</sup> Witness the sudden popularity of *Together for the Gospel*, beginning in 2006, which brought together four leading pastors and theologians from different reformed traditions in an effort to strengthen like-minded pastors around shared doctrinal commitments. The organization's website claims the bi-annual meetings hosted thousands of pastors from over 25 denominations. The general sentiment among reformed pastors was favorable toward this togetherness until the organization disbanded in 2022. See <http://www.t4g.org/about>, accessed May 12, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Todd M. Johnson, et al. *Christianity in Its Global Context, 1970–2020: Society, Religion, and Mission* (South Hamilton, MA: Center for the Study of Global Christianity, 2013), 16. <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2019/04/2ChristianityinitsGlobalContext.pdf>.

In earlier generations there may have been an instinct among theological liberals to prioritize unity at the expense of purity, and an opposite instinct among theological conservative to prioritize doctrinal purity with a careless approach to unity.<sup>4</sup> Such a division is rarely found in contemporary evangelical thought.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter identifies the influences that affect the purity and unity of the church, first from different values within the PCA, and then from changing values in the world. This chapter then focuses on contemporary evangelical thought connected to the unity of the church and notices how modern scholarship understands the call for unity against the backdrop of church purity, especially doctrinal. A noticeable pattern emerges across modern scholarship. Virtually all attempts to promote the purity and unity of the church fall into one of three categories.<sup>6</sup> Modern scholarship is in agreement that the church must pursue purity and unity in one way or another. The distinction between each of the approaches is one of degree and priority, for all are under the conviction that any approach to purity and unity of the church represents a healthy development.

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<sup>4</sup> Harold J. Ockenga decried those who prioritized doctrinal purity as the reason for the church's failure to have a meaningful unity. Chester Tulga, on the other hand, noted in 1959 that, "Since the church was founded to spread the true faith, when this faith is corrupted and compromised, the reason for any church's existence is destroyed." See Dave Saxon, "Unity and Purity In The Church," *Proclaim & Defend*, accessed May 12, 2023, <http://www.proclaimanddefend.org/2018/11/28/unity-and-purity-in-the-church/>.

<sup>5</sup> See Chester Tulga, "The Church and the Churches: The Problem of Christian Unity" in *The Doctrine of the Church In These Times*, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=r-BvzWZjb1g%3D&tabid=256&mid=835>. The instinct to prioritize either purity or unity to the exclusion of the other was most noticeable in the mid-twentieth century, especially with the rise of modernism as a threat to the church. Contemporary scholarship, especially in the Reformed community, sees purity and unity together, and so places almost no priority on one over the other.

<sup>6</sup> There is a fourth, minor thread detectable in modern scholarship, which we might denote An Eschatological Approach. The concern with this approach is that Jesus is returning soon, and we must, therefore, be united and pure as a people. See Alistair Begg, *Truth for Life, 365 Daily Devotions*, February 12, as quoted in Tom Ascol, "Unity in Christ," *Founders Ministries*, February 17, 2022, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://founders.org/2022/02/17/unity-in-christ/>. The overwhelming emphasis in this school of thought for the purity and unity of the church is on moral purity. Because it is a minor thread with relatively little attention, it is not included in this chapter.

- An Aspirational Approach: Unite because there are bigger things at stake than that which divides the church.
- A Missional Approach: Unite because without unity we lose our voice in culture.
- An Historical-Theological Approach. Are Divisions Really a Bad Thing?

### **Cultural Influences Affecting the Purity and Unity of the Church**

#### Influences from Within

In 2010, three leaders in the PCA were asked about the growing sense of tension, even balkanizing, of the PCA, as the various parties within the denomination seemed to be forming into groups that dangerously resembled schismatic jockeying. Melissa Kelly of *ByFaith Online*, the PCA's online magazine, highlighted the realities of PCA life by recalling the difference between formal values and animating values, which the 2010 Strategic Plan initially identified. The PCA was squarely aligned on the formal values of the church, namely the Westminster Confession of Faith and the two catechisms.

However, the challenge facing the PCA was in the form of its various animating values,

While few question the strength and clarity of the denomination's confessional standards (also called formal values) the PCA's animating values - as identified by the 2010 PC Strategic Plan - reflect tensions that frequently cause conflict within the denomination. And these animating values, those that get us up and going each morning for the work of our individual Presbyteries, ministries, and churches, affect how groups identify themselves and how they perceive others. The tensions are long standing and may be here to stay. But what is behind them? Are they inherent in the reformed faith? How can members reflect Christ while agreeing to disagree? And can the whole situation be leveraged into an opportunity for the PCA to thrive?<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Melissa Kelley, "Thankful For Internal Struggles: Can Tensions in the PCA Make Us Stronger?," *ByFaith Online*, November 23, 2010, accessed May 18, 2023, <http://byfaithonline.com/page/in-the-church/thankful-for-internal-struggles-can-tensions-in-the-pca-make-us-stronger>.

The PCA has long been a denomination marked by the tensions of competing values. Generally speaking, there remains universal agreement on the formal values of the church. However, it is the animating values that tell the story of the tensions. Ligon Duncan assessed the conflict in the PCA as nothing new,

Actually, I don't believe there are more tensions now than in the early days of the PCA. But the kinds of tensions have changed over the years period previously it was old school versus broadly evangelical, whereas now it's strict subscriptions versus TR. Some are committed to a kind of evangelical pragmatism, versus those interested in cultural engagement or traditional ecclesiology, for example a conservative set of impermeable boundaries such as the inerrancy of scripture, reform soteriology, and the rejection of ordination of women. That is because the founders wanted to make room for all the traditional reformed branches, perhaps not realizing what a challenge it has been historically to keep them all under one roof. The conflicting theological agendas of the PCA are not discrete doctrinal systems but are actually abiding aspects of the reform tradition itself. The fighting between them is not the cold warfare of different nations, but rather the white heat of sibling rivalry.<sup>8</sup>

Sean Lucas has a similar assessment, noting that, “what’s facing us is nothing new. That should give us confidence – It’s part of living in Christ’s church.”<sup>9</sup>

David Coffin takes a longer view, though similarly sees the opportunity to showcase the majesty of Christ even through internal skirmishes,

From the beginning of American Presbyterianism, the brethren agreed on when a majority vote is passed you either actively concur, passively submit or, if conscience will permit you to do neither, you peaceably withdraw. That's part of what it means to be in submission to the brethren, it's part of what it means to be Presbyterian. What it means, finally, to be a Christian, means willing to submit to the brothers. That's the culture we need to create in the PCA.<sup>10</sup>

Though the PCA has always faced the reality of internal tensions, the question remains why? In 2010, the denomination attempted to identify the internal pressures

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<sup>8</sup> Kelley, “Thankful For Internal Struggles.”

<sup>9</sup> Kelley, “Thankful For Internal Struggles.”

<sup>10</sup> Kelley, “Thankful For Internal Struggles.”

affecting the church’s purity and unity as a part of the long-range Strategic Plan. A growing concern was that individuals, churches and even entire Presbyteries had different animating principles that drove their philosophies of ministry. The diversity of those principles led to a wide variance of ministry priorities, strategies and investments. That reality, in itself, was not the main problem facing the PCA. But what threatened the peace of the denomination was the way those differences were perceived by those from networks of ministers. The Strategic Plan attempted to identify the differences and re-frame them as particular emphases within the overall communion of uniform formal values, that is, those things held in common by all.<sup>11</sup>

The left column of the chart below identifies goals common among groups in the PCA; the right column identifies how others may perceive groups with these ministry goals,

<b>Animating Principle</b>	<b>The Perception of Others</b>
Properly Expressing Reformed Theology. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restore southern Presbyterianism</li> <li>• Ensure doctrinal faithfulness at all levels</li> </ul>	Insensitive to relational opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All Mind</li> </ul>
Reaching the Lost <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multiply churches</li> <li>• Multiply people in churches</li> <li>• Multiply support</li> </ul>	Ignores doctrine and doxologically shallow <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All Heart</li> </ul>
Restoring the Culture <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reclaim the nation – founding commitments</li> <li>• Support conservative politics</li> </ul>	Idolizes the past and politics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fears the future</li> </ul>
Protecting the Faithful <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Separate from Secular</li> <li>• Support Schooling alternatives</li> </ul>	Idolizes family and community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fears culture</li> </ul>

<sup>11</sup> “PCA Strategic Plan: Prepared for the 2009 and 2010 Cooperative Ministries Committee” (Presbyterian Church in America, 2010), 6. A video presentation of some of these points in the Strategic Plan can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIgoebkKObo>, accessed May 18, 2023.

<p>Transforming the Culture</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oppose oppression (e.g., poverty, racism)</li> <li>• Reach “gatekeepers” of culture (e.g., media, arts, professors)</li> </ul>	<p>Idolizes external over internal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forgets the Spiritual mission of the church</li> </ul>
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In addition to the competing animating values within the PCA, there are numerous cultural challenges affecting the purity and unity of the church. The same Strategic Plan proposed eighteen of them. Though some are specific to the PCA, it seems evident that these same cultural challenges stretch across the denominational spectrum. We have identified and summarized six of the most salient cultural pressures effecting the contemporary PCA in its purity and unity,

1. Predominantly small churches struggling to survive (49% of PCA churches have less than 120 members; 20% have less than 50 members; only 8% have more than 500 members)
2. Four divides that have created a culture of suspicion in the PCA:
  - a. The “Haves” and the “Have-nots” Divide, especially connected to ministerial resources.
  - b. The Generational Divide:
    - i. Builders and Boomers tend to value institutional priorities, while GenX and Millennials tend to value relational priorities.
  - c. The Regional Divides:
    - i. Southern identity: The PCA began as a predominantly southeastern denomination with deeply held southern roots.
    - ii. Western autonomy: As the PCA grew westward, the churches in the west have felt disconnected from the roots of the PCA.<sup>12</sup>
  - d. The Perspectival Divides, including,
    - i. Old School Presbyterianism with a high value on the ordinary means of grace vs. New School Presbyterianism with a high value on innovation to reach the urban centers and transforming culture.

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<sup>12</sup> I spent 2003 - 2015 as the senior minister of a PCA church in California. Western autonomy was a major characteristic of the PCA in that region during those years.

- ii. Doctrinalists concern about theological-erosion vs. Missionalists concern about losing the church's voice in culture.
  - iii. Traditionalist priority on historical expressions of reformed liturgy vs. an emerging priority on modern expressions of reformed liturgy.
  - iv. Church Planters tend to have an entrepreneurial spirit prioritizing innovation vs. Church Providers tend to have an institutional spirit prioritizing structural longevity.
3. Rise of Networks for Fellowship/Perspective Affiliation, such as the Gospel Reformation Network of the PCA and the Alliance for Mission and Renewal, also of the PCA.
  4. Most members and leaders have little exposure to other cultures or the global church.
  5. Significant uncertainty regarding how to do theological reflection within the confines of a Confessional Church.
  6. Maintaining Biblical standards of headship while encouraging women to minister in the church, and how to discuss women in ministry without being caricatured as either a chauvinist or liberal.<sup>13</sup>

Each of these divides represents a set of values and strategies to advance its vision for a healthy PCA in the years to come. The existence of these pressures also represents a serious threat to the church's purity and unity.

#### Influences from Without

Further complicating the pursuit of the church's purity and unity is the stark reality that American culture is deeply divided, which divisions have inevitably influenced the modern church.<sup>14</sup> American culture is rapidly changing and with it has

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<sup>13</sup> For a fuller discussion on external pressures facing the PCA, see "PCA Strategic Plan," 8, 12–14.

<sup>14</sup> There is an endless parade of essays and articles, some more scholarly than others, on the issue of a divided America. See Ian Bremmer, "The U.S. Capitol Riot Was Years in the Making. Here's Why America Is So Divided," *Time* (blog), last modified January 16, 2021, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://time.com/5929978/the-u-s-capitol-riot-was-years-in-the-making-heres-why-america-is-so-divided/>. Bremmer proposes, "There is no advanced industrial democracy in the world more politically divided, or politically dysfunctional, than the United States today."

come massive shifts in values, priorities, and the place of Biblical truth in society.<sup>15</sup>

Dr. Michael F. Ross, moderator of the PCA's 40<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, hosted a seminar in 2014 on the influences causing tensions within the PCA. He noted three American cultural streams that are affecting the purity and unity of the PCA. The first is an over-arching ontology that is creating an epidemic of uncertainty, namely the question of identity. The question being asked by the world, which then streams into the church, is, "who am I?" When new believers enter relationships with one another and do not share a common sense of identity, then disunity is inevitable. Ross argues that a sense of self must be rooted in Paul's theology of union with Christ, which is mentioned over 120 times in the Pauline corpus.

The second external pressure challenging the PCA's purity and unity is, according to Ross, is the question, "what must I be?" This is the issue of personal holiness, or the ethics of the church. Where there is little consensus on purity of life and doctrine, there is commensurately little consensus in relationships.

The final external pressure threatening the purity and unity of the church is the world's view of the church. This centers on the question, "where do I live?" If Christians, whether new converts or long-time believers, do not share a common idea of the local church, then purity and unity is unlikely.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Frank Newport, "Fewer in U.S. Now See Bible as Literal Word of God," *Gallup.Com*, last modified July 6, 2022, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/394262/fewer-bible-literal-word-god.aspx>. The Gallup date shows that 49% of Americans believe the bible to be inspired by God but not to be taken literally. The sharpest decline of any category was those who believe the bible to be Word of God and taken literally, down to historically low 20% of Americans. The sharpest rise was those who believe the bible to be fables and moral stories recorded by man, up to 29%.

<sup>16</sup> See Michael F. Ross, *Preaching Holiness without Falling into Legalism*, Audio File, Gifts and Graces, 2014.

The PCA Strategic Plan identified a more detailed set of external challenges imposed by modern culture on the health of the American church, especially the PCA. The importance of understanding the depth and nuance of the external challenges is critical if the PCA is to respond well enough to forge a church characterized by purity and unity,

The cause that is our present calling must be forged from a comprehensive and realistic understanding of the challenges this generation must face in order to live faithfully before God and for his Kingdom. Some of these challenges are external, thrust upon us by dynamics of our history and culture.<sup>17</sup>

The external challenges are innumerable. Each person can add one or two to the list the PCA identified, based on their own experiences in ministry. Still, though not exhaustive, it is a helpful place to begin because understanding what pressures the church faces in a changing culture can help anchor the PCA for a change management approach that advances the mission of the church. As external pressures affecting the PCA, the Strategic Plan lists numerous, including,

1. Loss of Christian consensus in West has resulted in the rise of a Naturalistic worldview.
2. Historically large immigration across the American southern border has put pressure on the church to know how best to respond.
3. The rise of the Emergent Church in West has affected the place of the evangelical church within the Christian subculture of America.
4. A youth exodus from Western Church and modern Evangelicalism
5. Postmodern philosophies and mindset of subjective truth.
6. Pervasive Biblical and doctrinal illiteracy across all generations of Americans, regardless of religious identity.
7. Traditional family decline, including higher rates of divorce, delayed adolescence, delayed marriages, pervasive pornography, and absent fathers.
8. Gender roles re-definition and gender confusion.
9. Transition from Anglo-majority to Anglo-minority culture in U.S.

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<sup>17</sup> *PCA Strategic Plan*, 7.

10. Transition to no-growth economies in western Europe as birth rates fall among all but immigrant (Muslim, African and Asian) populations<sup>18</sup>

Each of these is heavy on the mind of all conscientious Americans who spar over solutions. Which political party is responsible? Is there a candidate most likely to restore America to a perceived superpower? What is the best direction for American society? As Americans have struggled to reach consensus on solutions, the party spirit invades the gospel community and drives wedges between brothers.<sup>19</sup> This has created the so-called, “Purple Church,” a mixture of political views that is increasingly characterizing the evangelical church. The surprising problem with the “Purple Church” is not that congregants launch fiery darts at one another or publicly and privately criticize the pastor for what was said or unsaid. The problem is not even that the church today is dealing with the newness of political infighting, as though previous generations knew nothing of it. According to Daniel Silliman, the surprising problem with the “Purple Church” is,

That people stop fighting. They part ways. And they sort themselves by political preference. Polarization makes it seem like unity in Christ can only come after political unity. Polarization makes it seem like partisanship is stronger than the gospel.<sup>20</sup>

“Polarization makes it seem like partisanship is stronger than the gospel.” That statement represents the corrosive effect of internal and external pressures eating away at the church edifice. All Christians in the reformed community agree that church unity and

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<sup>18</sup> *PCA Strategic Plan*, 8-9. This is a partial of what is included in the Strategic Plan. In addition to the full list in the Strategic Plan, we might add Christian nationalism, the global Covid-19 pandemic, run-away inflation, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, homelessness, reparations, and the prescription drug epidemic as cultural crises that affect the church.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel Silliman, “At Purple Churches, Pastors Struggle with Polarized Congregations,” *ChristianityToday.Com*, last modified October 20, 2020, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/november/purple-church-political-polarization-unity-identity-christ.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Silliman, “Purple Churches.”

purity take priority over external political or internal tribal loyalties, but their agreement can become clouded by the pull for allegiance. The hard part is identifying an approach that is most faithful to the Scriptures and best advances a healthy church. A survey of contemporary Christian scholarship reveals there are three approaches to solving the vexing issue of purity and unity in a pagan world, each drawn from its own presupposition.

**An Aspirational Approach: Reject Tribalism and Pursue Structural Unity Because  
Jesus Prayed For It**

Under this approach, the idea of purity and unity in the church is as central to the life of the church as is Christ Himself, because purity and unity of the church was the central thing Jesus prayed for the night before His crucifixion. Because Christ prayed for unity, spiritual unity is not enough. Some form of structural or organizational unity must be pursued, even if it is never fully achieved. This must be the aspiration of the church.

If Jesus was so concerned with his people's unity that He would spend his last few precious hours with the disciples praying for it, then we must learn to keep perspective on the things that divide us.<sup>21</sup> Tom Ascol argues,

Such tribalism and rivalry cannot coexist with humble, sincere devotion to Jesus Christ as Lord. *To have Christ is to embrace the ways of Christ which includes living with the people of Christ in a local church in the unity of the spirit.* Christians are able to do that because in Christ we are made into one new man. Seeing yourself as a hyphenated Christian before you see yourself as a blood bought Sinner inevitably tears the fabric of this precious unity. As Paul puts it in Ephesians 4:4-6, "there is one body and one spirit just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call - one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and father of all who is overall and through all

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<sup>21</sup> In the Summer of 2017, Tim Keller preached a series on Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17. On June 18, he preached from verses 20-23, which sermon forms the centerpiece to the series. He notes, "when you're dying you don't make small talk, you talk about things important to you." See Timothy Keller, "Unity" (podcast) Timothy Keller Sermons Podcast by Gospel in Life, [n.d.], accessed January 28, 2022, <http://podcast.gospelinlife.com/e/unity-1642522335/>.

and in all.” Any idea or teaching that leads to the balkanization of a church denies this fundamental truth and comes from the pit of hell.<sup>22</sup>

Ascol deploys strong language because he is animated by an Aspirational approach to the unity of the church. Things that cause divisions in the church are from the *pit of hell* because they do injury to Jesus’ prayer for unity. Across contemporary scholarship, this immediately raises the question of denominational legitimacy. How should modern Christians think about denominations or affinity groups if Jesus prayed for nothing of the sort? This is the concern of the Aspirational approach. For this approach to church purity and unity, the church can have either denominations and affinity groups, or unity. But the church cannot have both if Jesus’ prayer is to be answered.

John Frame advances the pithy argument that, “We must first be assured that Jesus Christ established on earth one church, not many denominations.”<sup>23</sup> Further, the unity of the church is not merely “spiritual,” but also organizational.”<sup>24</sup> Frame expands on the notion of denominationalism versus Jesus’ prayer for unity in an extensive eleven-point argument. Frame’s primary concern is that denominations are man-made and ultimately unnecessary if all Christians would simply adhere more closely to the bible. Because of the importance of Frame’s rhetorical flow, a lengthy quotation is necessary,

But what of unity? Did Jesus come to establish one church, as in the Old Testament, or many denominations? Does the Old Testament emphasis on church unity fall away with the coming of Christ? Certainly, if that is the case, it is very difficult to imagine why it should be so. Jesus' one sacrifice

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<sup>22</sup> Tom Ascol, “Unity in Christ,” *Founders Ministries*, February 17, 2022, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://founders.org/2022/02/17/unity-in-christ/>.

<sup>23</sup> John M. Frame, *Evangelical Reunion: Denominations and the One Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 8. Frame couches his anti-denominationalism as, “post denominationalism” envisioning the collapse of denomination in the protestant church the way communism collapsed in Eastern Europe. See Frame, *Evangelical Reunion*, 125, note 1. As this is sourced from the pdf version of the print book, the pagination differs from that of the printed versions.

<sup>24</sup> John Frame. *Evangelical Reunion*, 8.

obviously eliminates the need for animal sacrifices, a central altar, a continuing human priesthood. But why should it eliminate the need for unity among God's people, that beautiful unity about which the Psalmist spoke so eloquently (Ps. 133)? The need is still there. The New Testament is concerned about it as much as is the Old. Please consider the following:

1. As in the Old Testament, the New Testament believer worships at a central altar. For Christ himself fulfills the central altar of the Old Testament, and there is only one Christ. The church has a single location in one sense, though it is scattered throughout the earth; for it is seated with Christ in the heavenlies.

2. Jesus does come to build one church. "Church" is regularly used in the singular to refer to the whole New Testament people of God.

3. The New Testament church is a unity of a higher order than that of Old Testament Israel. For in the new order, the great schism between Jew and Gentile is broken down.

4. Other ways in which Scripture teaches church unity: (a) The New Testament images of the church: a temple, the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, the flock of the good shepherd, the branches of the vine, the people or family of God-- all stress unity.

5. The New Testament uses "church" to designate not only the universal body of Christ (above), but also the Christians in a region.

6. The Lord gives his church a church government. We do not, therefore, have the option of choosing when we will or will not submit to the government of the church. Thus, Christ's intention was to unite all his people under his officers. One Lord, one church, one church government.

7. Do denominations play any role in New Testament church government? Well, look up "denomination" in a concordance! You won't find it there! Denominations, in the sense of groups of Christians who differ from other Christians by some distinctives of doctrine...play no role in New Testament church government.

8. To carry the point even further: the New Testament rebukes the mentalities and practices which were later to produce denominational division in the church.

9. When Scripture speaks of the church as the body of Christ, it contrasts the harmonious working together of the parts of the body with "schism" or "division."

10. Jesus prayed that the church would be one, as he and his Father are one. Now some exegetes understand him here to be referring to "spiritual" unity rather than "organizational" unity...Biblical theologians speak of "the already and the not yet." God has begun to unify his church (even organizationally!), but there is more unity to come in the future.

11. Is unity given by divine sovereignty, or is it something that requires the efforts of human beings? Both!<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> John Frame. *Evangelical Reunion*, 12-16.

Frame's Aspirational approach contains two interconnected concerns: the fractured body of Christ represents a compromised witness in the world, and more importantly for Frame's aspiration, does damage to the Head of the church because denominationalism is not what Jesus' prayed for.<sup>26</sup> While he acknowledges the already/not-yet paradigm of understanding Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17, he also advocates for understanding Paul's creedal formula in Ephesians 4 in terms of, "one government." While laudable, it is difficult to reconcile Frame's anti-denominationalism in *Evangelical Reunion*.<sup>27</sup> On the one hand he notes that denominations are often (though not always) a painful result of fallen man's attempt at churchmanship.<sup>28</sup> These denominations exist for the present while a greater experiential unity expressed in a single ecclesiastical order is yet to come. On the other hand, he expresses his conviction that Jesus has instituted a church that includes a form of government. Being a Presbyterian, one assumes Frame means a Presbyterian government. If that is the case,

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<sup>26</sup> Frame has good historical grounding in his view. Rachael Henderlite notes, "Protestantism, although generally thought to be atomistic and fragmentary, never intended to destroy the unity and catholicity of the Church. Indeed, unity and catholicity were original to Protestantism. John T. McNeil is responsible for the strong statement that, 'all the good Reformers, with the exception of Luther in certain moods and special crises, were consistent advocates either of a Protestant or of a wider union'." Rachael Henderlite, "Presbyterian Ecumenicity: A Heritage and an Opportunity," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 57, no. 2 (1979): 81-171. See also John T. McNeil, "Foundations of Presbyterian Ecumenicity," *Journal of Presbyterian History*, 44, no. 1 (1966): 1-23, "The Reformers constantly and habitually assert the continuity of their churches with the Catholic church of history. It was important for them that this continuity should not be broken and that where it seemed to have been lost through abuses and impieties and doctrinal corruptions it should be restored by a fresh impulse from the Scriptures and the Early Church."

<sup>27</sup> While the body of Frame's *Evangelical Union* promotes an anti-denominationalism, he allows for fraternal relations short of full union. For instance, he writes, "If two denominations cannot merge, for one reason or another, the next best thing, certainly, is that they fellowship together as much as possible in order to get to know one another, break down stereotypes, persuade one another when that is necessary, and so on. Often, where conscience permits, this would include joint ministries of various kinds... The fraternal relationship is actually a kind of half-way union. For it presupposes that both denominations in the relationship accept the doctrinal and practical soundness of the other. Each body recognizes the soundness of the preaching, sacraments and discipline of the other, each recognizes the wisdom and other gifts to be found in the other group." Frame, *Evangelical Reunion*, 125-126.

<sup>28</sup> Frame, *Evangelical Reunion*, 4. See especially footnote 4.

then Frame is dismissing all non-Presbyterian denominations as unbiblical forms of government. That means, in turn, that Frame anticipates evangelical reunion increasingly, though it awaits full realization, to take on the characteristics of Presbyterianism. For Frame's idea to come to fruition would mean, in his words, "the practical differences between Presbyterianism, congregationalism and the episcopacy would be very small."<sup>29</sup> In his irenicism, Frame Aspirational approach hardly advances the ecumenical spirit that he wishes to promote in this point.<sup>30</sup>

The Aspirational Approach to purity and unity of the church decries the interpretation of oneness in John 17 as a purely spiritual unity, and not a true organic unity, as well. For Frame, a spiritual-only oneness in John 17 robs Jesus of his true intent for the church in the world.<sup>31</sup>

While agreeing with Frame on the essential ideal that true, experiential, and organic unity is something that, by God's grace, the universal church could progress toward, Richard Lints, on the popular Gospel Coalition website, offers a slightly altered view, updating Frame's post-denominationalism. Lints represents are more nuanced,

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<sup>29</sup> See Peter Leithart, review of *Evangelical Reunion*, by John Frame. <http://www.firstthings.com/article/1992/10/denomination-and-church>.

<sup>30</sup> Frame provocatively refers to the problem of partisan denominationalism as, "denominational chauvinism" and makes little room for churchly ministry endeavors that are confined to one's own denomination. Frame, *Evangelical Reunion*, 45.

<sup>31</sup> Frame, *Evangelical Reunion*, 8, 12 and 26. Here, Frame leans on Thomas M'Crie, who advocates that the primary attribute of the church is its unity, "Consider the church, again, in its more specific form, as a society consisting of men called out of the world lying in wickedness; and it will be still more evident that oneness is its attribute...the unity of the church in profession, in worship, and holy walking, was strikingly exemplified in the primitive age of Christianity. Those who gladly received the word were baptized and added to the church, consisting of the Apostles and other disciples, and they continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And after their number was still farther augmented by the addition of many thousands, the multitude of them that believed were on one heart and of one soul. This union was not confined to those who lived together, but all of them in every place formed one sacred brotherhood. How solemn, earnest and reiterated are the apostolical injunctions to preserve this unity and to avoid everything that has a tendency to violate or mar it." See Thomas M'Crie, *The Unity of the Church and its Divisions* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1821), 8.

balanced version of the Aspirational approach to church unity and purity that recognizes the historical validity of denominations and affinity groups. Lints is far more friendly to denominations in his effort to secure unity for the sake of Jesus' prayer in John 17. He laments that denominations run the risk of injuring Jesus' prayer for unity, but only when they become fiercely independent of each other and fall under the conditions of consumer culture.<sup>32</sup> For that reason, denominationalism may exist but must be carefully tended in order to preserve unity among the diversity of different traditions.

By virtue of the fact that the church exists across many cultures and language groups, and consists of diverse offices and diverse gifts, the question may fruitfully be asked: What does the unity of the church practically look like? The question is ever more pressing in this increasingly post-denominational world, where previously the unity of the church was often theologically conceived against the backdrop of denominations. Presbyterians were united by a common theological tradition. Anglicans were united by a common liturgical tradition. Methodists were united by a common practice of piety. The obvious question of denominations is the divisions and deep differences between denominations. The vast array of denominations represented in any Western context makes it difficult to discern the unity of the church that should grow out of the unity of the gospel. The pluralization of the denominations has brought with it the perception that the gospel itself is pluralized. "Denominationalism" is the term we often put on this besetting sin. If only we could get "beyond denominationalism," is the lament of many evangelicals today. This has led some to agitate for a post-denominational church, seeing denominations themselves as the cause of the problems of the deep divisions present in the church.<sup>33</sup>

For Lints, advocating for a post-denominationalism in the name of John 17 places too much blame on the reformation, especially as it gave birth to a proliferation of denominations. Rather, Lints sees denominations as those agencies to advance traditions

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<sup>32</sup> Richard Lints, "The Unity of the Church," *The Gospel Coalition*, [n.d.] <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-unity-of-the-church/>. Accessed May 18, 2023

<sup>33</sup> Lints, "The Unity of the Church."

and provide a platform for corporate rejection of civil meddling in church affairs. This, in turn, created a bond of union not easily broken.

Historically, denominations functioned not as the means of greater independence or division, but as concrete ways to protect peculiar emphases and traditions of the church in diverse places and times against government (the monarchies of Europe) related homogenizing influences. Denominations in this sense have been the central bearers of religious traditions and appropriate dissent from state controlled ecclesiastical hierarchies.<sup>34</sup>

Whereas religious conformity in the pre-reformation days tended to be forced by virtue of political power, denominations served to protect the church's precious doctrine by way of existing in multitudes. Lints says, "denominations with rare exceptions in the West never viewed themselves as 'the one true church,'"<sup>35</sup> Instead, they saw themselves as branches of the one true church removed from governing control of secular authorities. Out of that came a deep sense of unity across denominational lines, "The church across the ages and across the globe is bound together by the same gospel as interpreted and proclaimed by the apostles. This apostolic foundation entails that Scripture is the fundamental constitution of the church"<sup>36</sup>

Quite contrary to Frame's vision of a post-denominationalism, Lints makes room for denominations on the grounds that they have united the saints together, as much as they have divided them. This is a much healthier implication of John 17 than Frame's aspirationalism. Presbyterians have long valued traditions and the

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<sup>34</sup> Lints, "The Unity of the Church."

<sup>35</sup> Lints, "The Unity of the Church."

<sup>36</sup> Lints, "The Unity of the Church."

faith of the fathers. For Lints, denominations generally have a place in the life of the church insofar as they can be the standard bearers for those traditions. Denominations may confidently continue as long as they maintain a proper perspective on their existence.<sup>37</sup> The proper perspective on the existence of denominations centers on their biblical theological vision that all ecclesial bodies share a common spiritual genealogy.<sup>38</sup> Maintaining this perspective promotes a healthy approach to church unity and diversity. This is a worthy consideration for the future of ecclesial bodies organizing around a distinctive set of doctrine.

Within the strain of the Aspirational approach, Macleod adopts something of a doctrinally centered pursuit to the unity and purity of the church, thus moving the Aspirational approach closer to the other two. He doesn't go as far as Frame would later go and call for an outright post-denominational Protestant church. He does, however, agree that that things that divide the Protestant church are less important than Jesus' prayer for its unity, thus calling for the Protestant church to keep perspective on the things that divide. For Macleod, a purely spiritual unity does not satisfy Jesus' prayer,

Nor can we be content with a purely spiritual, ideal, Platonic unity. The believer is not an idea but flesh and blood. The Church is not an idea but flesh and blood. The unity of the Church must have the same visible, concrete reality. This is what the Lord prayed for: 'that they all may be one, that the world may believe that thou hast sent Me' (John 17:21). The love Christians had for one another was one that the world could see and be impressed by. It became visible in caring for one another (even when they were separated by hundreds of miles, Acts 11:29), by co-operation in evangelism (Phil. 1:5) by public assembly (Heb. 10:25), by mutual consultation (Acts 15:1ff), and by respect for universal practice (1 Cor. 11:33ff). Howard A. Snyder rightly warns against a Platonic dualism which

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<sup>37</sup> Lints, "The Unity of the Church."

<sup>38</sup> Lints, "The Unity of the Church."

distinguishes between an ideal church (which is safely one) and the real church (which is fragmented but need not be concerned about it).<sup>39</sup>

However, within only a few paragraphs of decrying unity that lacks a concrete reality, he gives considerable time to espousing the view that a true church must share a commitment to the reformers' *marks of the church*, including the right administration of the sacraments.<sup>40</sup> While we agree with Macleod on this front, it must be acknowledged that many evangelicals in the world today would not, thus undoing Macleod's aspiration toward organic unity of the Protestant church in "concrete reality."<sup>41</sup>

Despite its best efforts to the contrary, the Aspirational approach minimizes the reality of the church's spiritual union already achieved. It is this latter point that has been the historic view of the reformers.

By the unity of the church we must understand a unity into which we feel persuaded that we are truly ingrafted. For unless we are united with all the other members under Christ our Head, no hope of the future inheritance awaits us. All the elective God are so joined together in Christ that as they depend on one head, so they are as it were compacted into one body, being knit together like it's different members; made truly one by living together under the same spirit of God in one faith, hope and charity, called not only to the same inheritance and return of life, but to participation in one God in Christ.<sup>42</sup>

Spiritual unity because of Christ's headship and saving mercy should be accepted as just that: true unity, even if it is not organizational unity. G.W. Bromiley notes the biblical, historical pattern of this true, spirituality unity,

It is not for nothing that in the Old Testament the elect people of God, divided though it was into twelve tribes and later grouped into two kingdoms, consisted of a single race tracing its descent from a single

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<sup>39</sup> Donald Macleod, *Priorities for the Church: Rediscovering Leadership and Vision in the Church* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2003), 96–97.

<sup>40</sup> Macleod, *Priorities for the Church*, 97-110.

<sup>41</sup> Macleod, *Priorities for the Church*, 96.

<sup>42</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: In Two Volumes*, ed. John Thomas MacNeill, and Ford Lewis Battles, v.2 (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1960), IV.I.2.

progenitor. It is not for nothing that it was constituted the one nation by redemption out of Egypt, the deliverance at the Red Sea and the giving of the law at Sinai. There might be all kinds of breaches of this unity, from civil war on the one side to foreign marriages on the other. But nothing could shake the oneness of divine election, redemption, and overruling as focused in the common descent and national membership. The fact that Israel was a national unity clearly meant that it was to be one people.<sup>43</sup>

Ironically, the Aspirational approach runs the risk of a feeble ecumenism because it gives too little attention to the significance of true, spiritual reality as the primary marker of the church's self-identity. While a helpful and laudable approach, it leaves the door open for less unity than it might wish because the Aspirational approach must allow for individuals to pick and choose the fundamentals of the faith that must be commonly adhered to for unity to be organically realized.<sup>44</sup>

### **A Missional Approach: Reject Tribalism and Pursue Unity Because the World is Watching**

If the Aspirational approach to the church's unity and purity prioritizes Jesus' prayer in John 17, then the Missional approach prioritizes Jesus' assertion in John 13:35 that, "They will know you are my disciples by your love." A Missional approach to the purity and unity of the church finds its nourishment in the words of Francis Schaeffer,

[In John 13:35] if an individual Christian does not show love toward other true Christians, the world has a right to judge that he or she is not a Christian. Here [in John 17:21] Jesus is stating something else that is much more cutting, much more profound: We cannot expect the world to believe that

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<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Luder G. Whitlock, *Divided We Fall: Overcoming a History of Christian Disunity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), 10.

<sup>44</sup> This is contra Frame, who laments that the PCA is, "rather uninterested in, even suspicious of, ecumenism." Frame, *Evangelical Reunion*, 125. Frame appears to grant that ecclesial unity can and should center on the shared doctrinal agreements as summarized in the Apostles' Creed: a single, post-denominational body committed to a church that is holy, catholic and apostolic. One may question Frame on this front by wondering if such a vision would, in fact, be denominated, in this case by the Apostles' Creed. Whether or not a person can be a Christian and not subscribe to the Apostles' Creed is not addressed in Frame's book.

the Father sent the Son, that Jesus's claims are true, and that Christianity is true, unless the world sees some reality of the oneness of true Christians.<sup>45</sup>

For the Missional approach, purity and unity are, in Schaeffer's words, the final apologetic for the truth of Christ.<sup>46</sup> The Missional approach is less interested in the organizational/structural unity of the Aspirational approach and far more interested in the sense of community that genuine believers can share in the bonds of Christ. Whereas the driving impulse behind the Aspirational approach to purity and unity is the problem of tribal denominationalism, the driving impulse of the Missional approach is the problem of loveless Christians who lack charity and grace toward each other.<sup>47</sup> The Missional approach is far more willing to appreciate factions within the Protestant movement, and even within the local church under certain circumstances, seeing them as nuances of the same faith ultimately unified under Christ.<sup>48</sup> For the Missional pursuit of the purity and unity of the church, it's all about the witness of the church in a lost and dying world. This approach can be detected in the very fiber of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, for the denominational website clearly articulates how they have made a conscious decision not to argue or debate the non-essential issues they have defined,

When the EPC started in 1981, we determined that we would not disagree on the basic essentials of the Christian faith, but on anything that was not essential—such as the issue of ordaining women as officers or practicing charismatic gifts—we would give each other liberty. Above all, we committed ourselves to loving each other and not engaging in quarrels and strife. The result is that when we get together in our regional and national

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<sup>45</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *The Mark of the Christian*, 2nd ed., IVP Classics (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 26–27.

<sup>46</sup> For a narrative on Schaeffer's development of his "final apologetic," see Jose de Segovia, "Schaeffer and the Final Apologetics," *Evangelical Focus*, <https://evangelicalfocus.com/between-the-lines/2828/schaeffer-and-the-final-apologetics>, accessed May 18, 2023.

<sup>47</sup> These should not be read as mutually exclusive, rather the difference is on what each approach prioritizes.

<sup>48</sup> See Betty Pries, "Being in Communion: Unity Amid Conflict in the Church," *Vision*, 8 no. 1 (Spring 2007): 10–17. Pries argues that conflict in a local church, if addressed in humility and grace, is a powerful apology for the beauty of Christ's bride and an attraction to the skeptic.

meetings, we spend most of our time in worship and fellowship and almost none in arguing with each other.<sup>49</sup>

The church can have right doctrine and right government, but without love for one another and mutual respect for each other's distinguishing characteristics, the world will be pushed away.

I am convinced that in the twentieth century people all over the world will not listen if we have the right doctrine, the right polity, but are not exhibiting community." Schaeffer went on to add: "If we stress the love of God without the holiness of God, it turns out only to be compromise. But if *we stress the holiness of God without the love of God, we practice something that is hard and lacks beauty.*"<sup>50</sup> (Emphasis original)

The Missional approach reads Jesus' statement in John 13:35 as the apologetic for prioritizing any form of church unity, "They will know you are my disciples by your love." This approach recognizes the ugly face the Christian church puts forward when the followers of Christ fail to love each other well. Randy Alcorn laments how this has, in his view, become the norm in contemporary Protestantism,

Churches are experiencing a pandemic of tribalism, blame, and unforgiveness — all fatal to the love and unity Jesus spoke of. Rampant either/or thinking leaves no room for subtlety and nuance. Acknowledging occasional truth in other viewpoints is seen as compromise rather than fairness and charitability. Sadly, evangelicals sometimes appear as little more than another special-interest group, sharing only a narrow "unity" based on mutual outrage and disdain. This acidic, eager-to-fight negativity highlights Schaeffer's point that we have no right to expect unbelievers to be drawn to the *good news* when we treat brothers and sisters as enemies.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> See the Evangelical Presbyterian Church official website, <https://epc.org/about/>.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted from Schaeffer's, *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* in Tim Knight, "The Final Apologetic," *A Call to Excellence* (blog), May 14, 2019, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://www.acalltoexcellence.com/the-final-apologetic/>.

<sup>51</sup> Randy Alcorn, "A Pandemic of Disunity: How We Drive the World Away," *Desiring God* (blog), October 20, 2021, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/a-pandemic-of-disunity>.

For the Missional approach, the ideal of Christian unity may be couched in terms of true, meaningful community. The problem of a Christianity that lacks loving community within itself is that it breeds unbelief in the world around. In his call for the churches in large cities to come together for prayer, Mac Pier observes the danger of community-less Christianity,

*Disunity in the church breeds atheism in the world.* One of the manifestations of this disunity, according to the report, “The Great Opportunity” ([www.thegreatopportunity.org](http://www.thegreatopportunity.org)) is an estimated exodus of 1 million young adults leaving the U.S. church every year since 2008 for a total of 42 million by 2050. What practically every faith community in every city lacks globally is *muscularity*. Muscularity, in this context, is the ability of the faith community to come together in such a powerful expression of unity that it can address the greatest challenges of their city. Unity leads to muscularity.<sup>52</sup> (Emphasis original)

While the data set at The Great Opportunity does not suggest disunity among Christians as a leading reason for the 42 million young people walking away from the faith, Pier’s concern is a valid one.<sup>53</sup> If Jesus told the church that the world will know “you are my disciples by your love,” then the opposite is equally true: “the world will know you are not my disciples when Christian love and charity is absent.”

The Missional approach to church purity and unity is animated by the principle of self-death. That is, Christian traditions, potentially even denominations, long held approaches to ministry, and other cherished but non-essential values, all must be willing to be sacrificed for the sake of evangelism. Francis Schaefer referred to this as an

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<sup>52</sup> Mac Pier, “The Urgent Need for Church Unity,” *Christian Union*, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://www.christianunion.org/publications-media/christian-union-the-magazine/past-issues/winter-2020/2602-the-urgent-need-for-church-unity>.

<sup>53</sup> See <http://www.thegreatopportunity.org>, accessed May 18, 2023.

*Observable Love*, which he hoped would characterize the earliest leaders of the PCA.<sup>54</sup>

Donald Bloesch advocates for the self-death principle of the Missional approach,

It is my position that the future belongs to that branch of Christendom that is willing to make itself expendable for the sake of the evangelization of the world to the greater glory of God. This may well involve the death of denominations, even of mission boards and agencies, for the life of the paganized masses in the West and East.<sup>55</sup>

The Christian church has, from its beginning, debated and contended over important doctrines. In recent years there has been a resurgence of age-old debates. Calvinism versus Arminianism, the validity of the sign gifts, the responsibility of the church to the needs of the poor, the rite of baptism and the meaning of justification are all once again on the table for discussion.<sup>56</sup> The Missional approach tends to find dismay at the existence of these tensions for evangelism purposes and wishes to see mutual appreciation for the variance of evangelical nuance,

It is incontestable that the church, and especially the evangelical church, has lost much of its credibility on the mission field because of the bitter infighting between missionary boards and churches. Some have conjectured that China's capitulation to Communism was due, at least to some extent, to the spiritual vacuum in China fostered partly by intra-Christian warfare which prevented the church from giving a consistent and united witness to the truth of the gospel. Some observers are of the opinion that evangelical Protestantism has not advanced in Peru because of "painful historic divisions." The well-known missiologist Pierce Beaver has declared "more and more I am convinced exported divisiveness is the greatest hindrance to the spread of the gospel in the non Christian world." The ecumenical ideal is not a deadening uniformity but a diversity within unity. The evangelical coat should be a coat of many colors. Yet it is not a coat in which the colors do not harmonize. There can be only one faith and one dogma, but much

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<sup>54</sup> Tom Gibbs, "Bridge-Building, the PCA, and the Next 50 Years," *by Faith* 2.23, no. 79 (2023): 54–60.

<sup>55</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *The Future of Evangelical Christianity: A Call for Unity amid Diversity* (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1988).7.

<sup>56</sup> For an excellent summary of the historic and modern controversies shaking the protestant church, see Bloesch, *The Future of Evangelicalism*, 56-64. Though Bloesch first published this work in 1983, it was updated in 1988 and is still remarkably timely in its assessment of debated issues straining the protestant church today.

room for variation in liturgical practices, theological systems and modes of evangelism.<sup>57</sup>

Contrary to Frame, Keller's Missional approach leads him to a vastly different conclusion on the issue of sectarianism within the Protestant movement. Keller wants for the church to be united for the sake of mission and witness, not because he believes Jesus' prayer is threatened by the existence of affinity groups. Keller's Missional approach wants oneness among his people in love and unity,

“Some people have read that (that Jesus' prays that they should all be one) and said, 'that means we should all be in the same church. In the twentieth century there was, for many years, a major movement on the part of the larger mainline protestant churches to all merge because they believe that, when they look at this verse, that that's what Jesus was praying for. For merger! 'Then we wouldn't have all these denominations and churches...' but that can't be what Jesus is talking about. And the reason it can't be is because...he says, 'when the world sees it (your unity), they'll be struck by it that it will make them open to the claims of the gospel...Amazon just bought Whole Foods. Does anyone look at that (merger) and say, 'behold how they love one another?' Merger can't be what Jesus is talking about. Well then what is He talking about, here? Well, He says, 'that all of them may be one...' The early church got off the ground because of its unity and loving community. The world looked at that and they were amazed.<sup>58</sup>

Later in the same sermon, Keller argues for the valid consideration of Godly Christian unity in terms of a Christian instinct to share “possessions, problems, truth and failure.”<sup>59</sup> Keller contributes to the Missional approach by advocating for a unified church along these four lines as an attraction to the world that makes the Gospel an appealing message to hardened unbelievers.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Bloesch, *The Future of Evangelicalism*, 64.

<sup>58</sup> Keller, *Unity*.

<sup>59</sup> Keller, *Unity*.

<sup>60</sup> Keller, *Unity*. Keller points to the early church as an example of sharing possessions, problems, truth and failure that resulted in unprecedented growth and addition.

In a separate place, Keller offers helpful pastoral advice on the way conflict within a Christian community can be handled to be an attraction to the skeptic, especially in a polarized era,

- Take full responsibility for even unwitting misrepresentation of others' views,
- Never attribute an opinion to your opponents that they themselves do not own,
- Take your opponents' views in their entirety, not selectively,
- Represent and engage your opponents' position in its very strongest form, not in a weak "straw man" form,
- Seek to persuade, not antagonize—but watch your motives!
- Remember the gospel and stick to criticizing the theology—because only God sees the heart.<sup>61</sup>

It is hard to find fault with those eager for church purity and unity for the sake of the Gospel. It is certainly agreeable that Christians simply must dwell in unity for the sake of Christ's witness in the world. It cannot be doubted that disharmony in the church represents a significant deterrent to the unbelieving world. After all, who would want to join a community that is infected with unreconciled squabbles and spats? Doesn't the world both want and need something better? The Missional approach recognizes the dilemma a disunified church represents when trying to fulfill that aspect of the Great Commission to bring the lost into the life of the church.

However, a criticism of this approach may be identified. The weakness of the missional approach is its narrow view of the Great Commission.

In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus said, "<sup>18</sup>And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. <sup>19</sup>"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son

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<sup>61</sup> Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 376–380.

and the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” While tempting to read evangelism in the Great Commission to the exclusion of discipleship, to do so represents an incomplete hermeneutic. Jesus did not prioritize evangelism over discipleship but commissioned the church for both. Strengthening the church’s purity and unity is a major part of being a faithful disciple of Christ, which is always aided by a community or church of like-minded disciples. The discipleship aspect of the Great Commission is inadvertently minimized or left out altogether in the Missional approach to the pursuit of the purity and unity of the church. Bluntly stated, the Missional approach, while a helpful contribution to the purity and unity discussion, runs the risk of sacrificing discipleship in the context of like-minded Christians for the sake of evangelizing non-Christians.

### **An Historical-Theological Approach: Reject Tribalism, But Are Divisions Really a Bad Thing?**

Under the idea that doctrine unites as much as it divides, a third trend in contemporary scholarship is detectable, namely an Historical-Theological approach to the church’s unity. This approach recognizes that true unity in the bonds of Christ really and truly exists, even across legitimate denominationalism. Michael Horton adopts an Historical-Theological approach,

Today, evangelicalism is far less divided by doctrine, which is generally treated with indifference, than by particular ideology that cultural transformation should take. “Deeds, not Creeds” has already been tried – many times and has simply led to ungodly strike and divisions in Christ’s body even over matters that are clearly addressed in scripture.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Michael Horton, “Creeds and Deeds: Interview with Mike Horton,” *Christianity.Com*, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://www.christianity.com/theology/creeds-deeds-interview-mike-horton.html>.

The Historical-Theological approach to church unity advocates that unity be understood as possible only when it is rooted in sound biblical doctrine. The problem with pursuing unity without prioritizing shared orthodoxy is that eventually the unity will show itself to be a veil. At the root of this eventuality is the problem of moral equivalences, where virtually all doctrinal opinions are equally valid and thus should be set aside.<sup>63</sup>

Whereas both the Aspirational and Missional approaches tend to draw a sharp distinction between important and non-essential doctrines, the Historical-Theological approach minimizes that distinction. That is, the Aspirational and Missional approaches are happy to acknowledge that there must be some doctrinal standard at the root of Christian unity, but only the most important ones. Where there are non-essentials, let charity rule the day and let all parties set the non-essentials aside for the sake of unity. In contrast, the Historical-Theological approach is weary of such a firm distinction because it believes that far too many “non-essentials” are actually vitally important.

Scott Aniol notes the development from the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy,

Liberals like Harry Emerson Fosdick decried this sort of fundamentalism that stressed the necessity of Christian unity being defined by fundamental doctrines. They claim that the virgin birth, the inerrancy of scripture, substitutionary atonement, and the bodily return of Christ must not be impediments to Christian unity. Fosdick insisted on a “spirit of tolerance and Christian liberty” concerning these issues, insisting that we should be ashamed “that the Christian Church should be quarreling over little matters when the world is dying of great needs.” Early fundamentalists argued that these doctrines were not “little matters,”; rather, they were the very defining doctrines of biblical Christianity and therefore the necessary boundary of

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<sup>63</sup> Carter Skeel, “There Must Be Factions,” *American Reformer*, October 6, 2022, accessed May 12, 2023, <https://americanreformer.org/2022/10/there-must-be-factions/>. Skeel deploys the issue of political differences to highlight the moral equivalency problem, but his point is as easily applied to doctrinal differences.

Christian unity. As Kevin Bauder notes, “fundamentalists believe that separation from apostates is essential to the integrity of the gospel.” Furthermore, early fundamentalists also insisted that doctrines beyond these gospel fundamentals matter and affect unity and cooperation among those inside the boundary of the gospel.<sup>64</sup>

Aniol, Horton and other advocates of the Historical-Theological are weary of calls to ecumenism because of they have rarely seen ecumenism produce scripturally faithful unity. It is noteworthy that with the rise of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy came a dedicated effort toward a unity without shared orthodoxy.<sup>65</sup>

The Historical-Theological approach emphasizes the risk of collapsing too many important doctrines into the non-essential category. Contemporary evangelicalism champions a view of Christian unity that fails to prioritize doctrinal alignment without appropriating the risk. By implicitly or explicitly minimizing doctrinal orthodoxy, Christians risk robbing the very thing the Aspirational and Missional approaches are after, obeying Christ’s prayer and reaching the world because their unity is leaky. Too many problematic theologies become acceptable or ignored.

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<sup>64</sup> Scott Aniol, “Unity and Separation,” *G3 Ministries*, November 5, 2021, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://g3min.org/unity-and-separation/>.

<sup>65</sup> Take, for instance, high-appeal calls to the church to lay aside its doctrinal commitments for the sake of the unbelieving world that came out sequentially, in 1912, 1913, and 1914. In 1912, the New York Times published an article called, simply, “Church Unity” that said, “that the influence of the church would be greater and therefore more beneficial if the barriers separating various Christian sects could be removed is not to be doubted...there is no doubt that religion can be made a more potent force if the sects forget their differences and work in harmony.” See <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1912/11/10/100556277.html?pageNumber=16e:>, accessed May 18, 2023. In 1913, the University of Chicago published, “The Progress of Church Unity” which called for a more excellent way of unity, “Unitarians, Universalists, and like-minded Christians...this imposing army of Christian believers have forgotten their differences of polity and doctrine and creed, remembering only their common call to service; and thus they have attained, in a real and vital measure, unto the “more excellent way.” See, Arley B. Show, “The Progress of Church Unity.” *The Biblical World* 42, no. 2 (1913): 80–88. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3142375>. In 1914, The University of Northern Iowa published, “The Great Stakes in Church Unity” which says adversarially, “Some rejoice not in the ‘common faith’ but in that which separates them from other Christians, and in their own view, exalts them. The American people should insist on democracy in the churches.” See, Calvin Dill Wilson, “The Great Stakes in Church Unity.” *The North American Review* 199, no. 699 (1914): 240–51, accessed May 18, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25120172>. While not exhaustive, these national publications capture the spirit of the age toward ecumenical unity.

Christian unity is not, as many practice today, a minimization of doctrine so that we can all get along and reach the world. On the contrary, our unity that will reach the world is based on being distinct from the world and set apart by the truth of the Word.<sup>66</sup>

Ligon Duncan's Historical-Theological approach can be noted from this his forward to Luder Whitlock's book, *Divided We Fall*,

The twentieth century has seen a number of failed strategies to promote unity among evangelical Christians. One is to unite around a mission and make theology a secondary matter. But the message and mission of the church are irreducibly theological, and so what eventually happens when this strategy is used is that the gospel itself gets thinned and diminished—or, worse, elastic.

Another failed strategy has been to try to unite around a few core theology affirmations and declare everything else secondary. For instance, “we all believe in the atonement, and so our differences on baptism shouldn't matter.” But this view underplays the practical importance of much Bible truth in the everyday life of the church and tends to promote an ambivalence about things on which we should be emphatic. It also fails to reckon with the fact that the Bible's theology is systematic (whether people want to admit that or not!) and that truths are therefore interconnected with other truths. There are other reasons why Baptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Catholics believe what they believe about baptism, so you can't just isolate their beliefs about baptism and declare them inconsequential when they entail other important theological assertions.<sup>67</sup>

The importance of maintaining theological distinctives as a root for meaningful, Christian unity is discernable. Duncan is a Presbyterian. Presbyterians need only to look to their history to see the mistake made when unity is tried alongside latitudinarianism. The 1801 Plan of Union attempted to bring together Presbyterians and Congregationalists for the purpose of mutual labors to reach the American frontier. They could agree on the essentials of the Gospel: the need for regeneration, the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, the virgin birth and the bodily resurrection of Christ. Each was asked to lay aside the non-

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<sup>66</sup> Aniol, *Unity and Separation*.

<sup>67</sup> Ligon Duncan, in Luder G. Whitlock, *Divided We Fall: Overcoming a History of Christian Disunity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), ix–xi.

essentials like polity and the education of ministers. The result was no lasting union between the two, and helped lead to a split within the Presbyterian church in 1837. Presbyterians must not look far to see that true unity orbits around shared doctrine.

The Historical-Theological approach leans into the question of how the church can promote the unity of the church in the healthiest way possible. If the Aspirational approach centers on removing tribal barriers for the sake of Jesus' prayer, and the Missional approach centers on laying barriers aside for the sake of evangelizing the world, then the Historical-Theological approach centers on maintaining barriers for the health of the church. The question for the Historical-Theological approach then becomes, what are healthy barriers. This approach emphasizes to a greater degree than the others that theological differences are not barriers to unity but represent healthy distinctives that promote important theological conversation and meaningful unity.

The Historical-Theological approach is willing for the church to prioritize doctrines that some evangelicals might see as non-essential. They are more willing to define Christian unity around the whole counsel of God, not solely on the essential doctrine of the cross. This approach sees a hazard of reducing unity to doctrinal minimalization, which in turn tends to weaken the gospel witness in the world,

Often in a noble attempt to unify around the gospel in order to reach the world, many evangelicals have forgotten the importance of separation from the world, instead attempting to be as much like the world as possible as a means to reach the world. They assume that in order to reach the world, we need to be liked by the world, forgetting that Jesus Himself said that unity around his truth would cause the world to hate us. This lack of separation from the world inevitably leads to dissolving the boundary of Christian unity – the Gospel. Iain Murray argues that this is a serious problem for Evangelicals, "Apostasy generally arises in the church just because this danger ceases to be observed." The consequence is that spiritual warfare gives

way to spiritual pacifism, and, in the same spirit, the church devises ways to present the gospel which will neutralize any offense...That this has happened on a large scale in the later twentieth century is to be seen in the way in the interests and priorities of contemporary culture have come to be mirrored in the churches...the antipathy to authority and to discipline, the cry for entertainment by the visual image rather than by the words of Scripture, the appeal of the spectacular, the rise of feminism, the readiness to identify power with numbers, the unwillingness to make ‘beliefs’ a matter of controversy – all these features so evident in the world’s agenda are now also to be found in the Christian scene. Instead of churches revolutionizing the culture the reverse has happened, churches may have been converted to the world...some evangelical attempts to unify exclusively around the gospel have minimized any other doctrines they deem as secondary to the gospel, insisting that these “non-essentials” must never affect Christian unity.<sup>68</sup>

Certain doctrines held dear by most Reformed Presbyterians are increasingly considered divisive. In turn, those who hold such views as biblical complementarianism, traditional sexual ethics or the Regulative Principle of Worship are in danger of being labeled schismatics. Scott Aniol identifies the danger in this, “if we consider no doctrines beyond the gospel important, eventually lack of clarity on those doctrines will weaken the gospel itself.”<sup>69</sup>

The Historical-Theological approach is far less leery of “non-essential” doctrines. John Piper notes that the very existence of the apostles’ Peter and Paul’s writings on theological distinctives, far from creating tribalism, suggests that theological argumentation actually promotes the purity and unity of the church.<sup>70</sup> In his Historical-Theological approach to church purity and unity, Scott Aniol shifts the focus from the gospel as the center of our unity to the gospel as the boundary of our unity. He notes that

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<sup>68</sup> Aniol, *Unity and Separation*. See also Iain Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950 to 2000*, Reprint. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2001), 255.

<sup>69</sup> Aniol, *Unity and Separation*.

<sup>70</sup> John Piper, “Christian Unity in Three Steps,” *Desiring God* (blog) October 28, 2022, accessed May 18, 2023, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/christian-unity-in-three-steps>.

the beauty of Christian unity has a powerful effect on the church's witness, but true unity needs to be defined by boundaries. Christians must remember that they are sanctified by the Word and are thus set apart from the world. Christian unity is not a minimization of doctrine so that we can all get along nicely and reach the world. Rather, the witness of the church is most effective when the church is most confident in the uniqueness of their belief.

What this means then is that there is a boundary around Christian unity...The gospel is the boundary of Christian unity. Over the last 15 years or so, conservative evangelicals have talked a lot about the gospel as the center of Christian unity. It is what brings us together, it is what we unite around. All other doctrinal issues should be set aside, they say, in order for us to be unified around what really is important, the gospel. But this thinking is actually backwards. Contrary to these popular evangelical movements the gospel is not the center of Christian unity. The gospel is the boundary of Christian unity.<sup>71</sup>

In what ways, then, are we to understand the center and limits of Christian unity? The Historical-Theological approach answers by advocating that unity should be understood in terms of levels,

Christian unity necessarily has two levels: unity within the boundary of the gospel and unity centered on other important biblical doctrines and practices. The more agreement I have with someone in these other matters, the more unity I can have with him. Conversely just because I might affirm that someone is a Christian who is inside the boundary of the gospel does not mean that I will be able to unify with him on every level. Disagreements over other secondary doctrines necessarily affect levels of Christian unity and cooperation especially church planting and church membership. Of course, the challenge becomes deciding which doctrines will affect a given level of unity. Something like the identity of the "sons of God" in Genesis 6 should not affect any Christian unity; But what levels of unity will important doctrines like eschatology, ecclesiology, baptism, and soteriology effect? The important point here is that, while it may be challenging to decide where these doctrines fall in their effect on Christian unity, they

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<sup>71</sup> Aniol, *Unity and Separation*.

should affect some levels of unity, and each church will need to decide the degree to which they will. The alternative is an unhealthy doctrinal minimalism that does not consider any doctrines really important beyond the gospel.<sup>72</sup>

This Historical-Theological approach is willing to acknowledge that every denomination and church must have some measure of subjectivity to decide which are the important doctrines that include or exclude other Christians from meaningful unity or partnership in mission. This approach is unbothered by the need to make decisions around essential versus non-essential doctrines. This eases Luder Whitlock's strain over the existence of denominations. After reviewing the development of Presbyterianism in the United States from 1706 to the present, he says,

Protestants in America generally regard themselves as members of a family or related religious bodies called denominations. They were heirs of a common faith, and saw themselves as part of a larger body called the church.<sup>73</sup>

This has been the historical approach to purity and unity the PCA has taken since the fight for the soul of the southern Presbyterian church.

When the Presbyteries of the Presbyterian Church in the United States voted down union with the more liberal Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in 1954, those who were determined to have union at any cost began working to effect union by varied, and sometimes unconstitutional, means. These radical ecumenists greatly deflected the teaching of the four seminaries of the denomination away from commitment to the Bible as the verbally inspired Word of God and from the defense of the Westminster Standards of our church. Mostly by a faulty interpretation of the seventeenth chapter of John, young ministers were taught organic union of church organizations as a great Christian ideal and changing of the social and political order as the mission of the church. The radical ecumenists by 1960 had taken control of most of the church and were continuing a steady well-planned drive towards a "watered down" theology and the ultimate in

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<sup>72</sup> Aniol, *Unity and Separation*.

<sup>73</sup> Whitlock, *Divided We Fall*, 99.

church union as expressed in the Constitution on church Union - a kind of American super church.<sup>74</sup>

The contribution to the conversation on the purity and unity of the church from the Historical-Theological approach is that it is far more willing to narrow the gate of unity for the sake of the purity of the church. William Barker observes that this conviction is inherited from the puritans, who in turn inherited this approach to unity from the magisterial reformers.<sup>75</sup>

### **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that the purity and unity of the church are related and elusive. Modern scholarship has sifted itself into three primary approaches, based on three distinct priorities. The Aspirational approach hears Jesus praying for the unity of the saints in John 17 and wants the church to respond by keeping all divisions in perspective to Jesus' prayer until the Protestant world moves increasingly toward structural or organizational unity. The Missional approach understands that such structural unity may not be necessary at all, because Jesus said the world will know, "you are my disciples by your love." For the world to be attracted to the community of the saints, the church must find ways to set aside non-essential doctrines and present a unified, loving community that will attract the unbelieving world.

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<sup>74</sup> <https://www.pcahistory.org/documents/steeringcommittee.pdf>, accessed May 12, 2023. See also, <https://pcahistory.org/pca/50th/images/WhichWay/ecumenism.pdf>, accessed May 12, 2023. The four seminaries of the PCUS were Union Theological Seminary, Columbia Theological Seminary, Austin Theological Seminary and Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. By 1966, these same four institutions all denied the importance of biblical inerrancy.

<sup>75</sup> William S Barker, "Puritans and the Purity of the Church," *Presbyterian* 14, no. 2 (1988): 88–97.

The Historical-Theological approach is weary of laying aside non-essentials because doing so presents two problems: 1) doing so has not yet proven to advance the church's unity but has only created lasting distrust, and 2) doing so opens the door for increasingly latitudinarianism. Rather, for the Historical-Theological approach, divisions among Protestants provide an opportunity for healthy churches which will in turn provide opportunity for healthy evangelism and healthy discipleship. The Historical-Theological approach places greater emphasis on the reality, and therefore significance, of the true, spiritual union that believers enjoy in the bonds of Christ. They see a difference between sectarianism and denominationalism that the other approaches do not.<sup>76</sup>

Each of the three approaches to purity and unity of the church provides a meaningful contribution. Jesus prayed for unity, so the church should make haste to realize it in concrete terms. Jesus also wanted the world to find attraction in the church's love for one another, so we should make every effort to lay aside doctrinal differences to reach the world. Jesus also wants a healthy church free from doctrinal error, so we should commit ourselves to maintaining robust theology beyond the essentials and engage in respectful dialog with debate partners, whether online in person.

All three approaches agree that there's a significant difference between unity and unanimity. A foreboding sense of disunity will always haunt the church if unanimity is thought to be the goal. Total agreement on the finer points of exegesis, ministry emphasis or expressions of reformed worship cannot be the ideal of what it means to hold the church together in unity. Rather, the focus of the church's doctrine of unity can more healthily be on maturing into manhood. On this front, John Piper is helpful as he thinks

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<sup>76</sup> See Whitlock, *Divided We Fall*, 99-104.

about the unity of the church in our own day.<sup>77</sup> There will never be unanimity on matters of taste or doctrine. That is not a bad thing because we are meant to be people who are “growing into manhood,” as the Apostle Paul says in Ephesians 4:13, “<sup>13</sup>until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.” As we grow into maturity in the faith, struggles over doctrinal purity will always have a pull-apart effect, threatening unity. So how are the maturing believers to think about their unity? Piper encourages the leaders of the church to cut through any particular disagreement or difference of point and find Christ at the center of each believer’s motivation. Motivation is key. For the reformed Presbyterian, the glory of God is the purpose of all things, including the exercise of theological inquiry and the motives for doing so. Piper looks to Romans 14 as an example of godly disagreement. There, Paul’s point is not to compel all believers to agree on all points of life and doctrine. He gives examples of observing days and of eating foods as points of disagreement among believers. Though the early church could not reach a consensus on how best to apply the Word in those disputed areas, Paul wanted to leverage the disputes as a way of pursuing the purity and unity of the church in the world,

He’s showing them how to lay hold of a unified mindset of doing all to the honor of the Lord and not despising each other. That’s what’s going to hold them together — that radical God-centeredness that puts the Lord first, however you may disagree on the application...Peter and Paul press us toward unity of mindset, or unity of attitude set, or unity of disposition that is marked by humility, and sacrificial service, and a Christ-exalting motive for all we do.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Piper, “Christian Unity in Three Steps.”

<sup>78</sup> Piper, “Christian Unity in Three Steps.”

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONTENDING FOR THE FAITH: TWO CASE STUDIES ON JONATHAN DICKINSON'S DEFENSE OF THE PURITY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

The history of Presbyterian discord in American goes back as far as American Presbyterianism itself. Presbyterians have been in the battle arena a very long time, and none more successfully contended for the faith than Jonathan Dickinson. Church histories uniformly promote him as a conciliatory churchman devoted to the unity of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. That is not an inaccurate assessment. However, it may be an incomplete portrait if his conciliatory overtures are thought to mean he was willing to negotiate over the purity of the church. His contemporaries thought quite differently. His conciliation needs to be situated in the context of his ministry.

Upon his death, his friend John Pierson elaborated on the character of Dickinson's long ministry at Elizabethtown. He said his friend was a man of genuine piety who made the glory of God and the honor of his savior his highest aim in life and ministry. Dickinson was a man, Pierson said, who was unshaken in the face of any challenge that befell him yet was warm in his zeal for truth. However, Pierson would not agree that Dickinson was a conciliatory moderate on important matters of life and doctrine. Though he was not of a litigious nature, Dickinson would stand his ground and even engage in fierce theological discourse,

He would sacrifice anything for peace except truth and duty. [Once truth and duty were challenged...Dickinson] insisted on refuting pernicious errors and on defending and establishing important laboring truths of the gospel.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter consists of two case studies highlighting how Dickinson refuted pernicious errors to pursue the purity of the church. Errors that, if gone unaddressed, would have corrupted the early Presbyterian church. Dickinson would not allow such corruption to go unchecked, despite his being a known conciliatory in his time. These critical threats to the purity of the church are, admittedly, lesser known compared to his more highly publicized contentions over the need for limits in the church, that is, the subscription debates, and the need for order in the church, that is, the Great Awakening debates. However, they represented no less threat to the burgeoning Presbyterian communion. Dickinson's entire ministry was characterized by the threat of corruption from the outside and the threat of schism from the inside.

### **The Threat of Corruption: The Challenge from Anglicanism**

Presbyterians are no strangers to the worship wars, a fact well-established by the very presence of different worship styles within the Presbyterian Church in America. However, what lay at the root of the discussions connected to the expression of Lord's Day worship is the doctrine of the Regulative Principle of Worship. The Westminster Confession of Faith summarizes the issue,

The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all; is good, and doeth good unto all; and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served with all the heart,

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<sup>1</sup> John Pierson, *The Faithful Minister: A Funeral Sermon Preached at Elizabeth Town, October 9, 1747. Occasioned by the Death of the Reverend Jonathan Dickinson, Late Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, Elizabeth Town* (New York, NY: James Parker, 1748), 1-13, 20-21. For more on Pierson's sermon, Bryan F. LeBeau, *Jonathan Dickinson and the Formative Years of American Presbyterianism* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 187-188.

and with all the soul, and with all the might. But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited to his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.<sup>2</sup>

Presbyterians have long cherished the notion that the public worship of God is to be according to the Word of God and is not to include anything that stems from the imaginations and devices of men. This is the issue that captured the attention of Jonathan Dickinson in 1736, on the eve of the Great Awakening. In God's kind providence, Dickinson labored directly and fiercely to secure a church that many enlivened souls from the revival would enter and remain.

Relations between the Anglicans and Presbyterians were never good in the American Colonies. Tensions were especially high in the Middle Colonies.<sup>3</sup> In 1722, Jedidiah Andrews wrote a letter to his Bostonian friend Benjamin Coleman to lament the growing strife in the Synod of Philadelphia.

Two or three things have happened within a twelve month among us of no very promising aspect amongst some few other better things. The business of the protestation that happened at our last synodical meeting I have endeavored to heal, and I hope it will be healed. I do not know but the Pacific articles have had their good use. In short, I think the difference is in words, for I cannot find any real difference, having sifted the matter in several letters which have passed between Mr. Dickinson and me upon it. I am still of the mind, as I told you before, that the squabble at New York is at the bottom and has an evil influence on our peace. I wish it may not do more hurt hereafter.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *The Confession of Faith: The Larger and Shorter Catechisms, with the Scripture Proofs at Large; Together with the Sum of Saving Knowledge (Contained in the Holy Scriptures, and Held Forth in the Said Confession and Catechisms) and Practical Use Thereof*, 5. repr. (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publ, 1988), 21.1.

<sup>3</sup> For an account of the confluence of Anglicanism and Presbyterianism in the Colonies, see Charles Augustus Briggs, *American Presbyterianism: Its Origin and Early History* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1885), 116–25. See also Le Beau, *Dickinson*, 64.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Webster, *A History of the Presbyterian Church in America: From Its Origin until the Year 1760, with Biographical Sketches of Its Early Ministers* (Philadelphia, PA: Joseph M. Wilson, 1857), 99–100.

The presenting issue was the disagreement over the subscription issue, but Andrews sensed, from numerous letters he had exchanged with Dickinson, that there was a deeper issue agitating the Presbyterians in the Middle Colonies. He wrote several times about his conviction on the matter. He was convinced that the real issue causing distrust between the warring parties stemmed from what he called the “squabbles at New York.”<sup>5</sup> The squabbles referred to a 1716 skirmish between the Anglicans and Presbyterians in New York. The Presbyterian Church in New York City had called the Rev. James Anderson from Scotland to serve as minister. The congregation was almost exclusively comprised of Scotsmen, even calling itself The Church of Scots from North Britain. The Anglicans in the same city held sway over the New York City council and worked to block the Presbyterians petition for incorporation. The rejection of incorporation spun the New York Presbyterians into internal conflict, now over the title rights to the property and the proper use of donated funds as it related to the church’s debt. In effect, the Anglicans successfully, if temporarily, defeated the Presbyterians’ desire to establish their congregation in New York City.

Anglicanism and Presbyterianism had long presented problems for one another because each viewed the other as a threat to their system of religion. Theirs was a rivalry for the hearts and minds of the middle colonies, especially. The Anglicans still sought

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<sup>5</sup> Le Beau, *Dickinson*, 30. Our purpose is not to explore the ‘squabbles’ in detail, but to note that there were long running tensions between the Presbyterians and the Anglicans that were appearing in the Presbyterians’ discourse. It is interesting to note, however, that out of these squabbles, a group separated from the Presbyterian Church of New York. When no agreement could be reached between the two sides, a petition was made to Yale for a minister to preach to the separatists. That, too, could not be settled, until the trustees from Yale sent a nineteen-year-old Jonathan Edwards to minister among the separatists. The separation lasted around a year. For more on “the squabbles at New York,” see Le Beau, *Dickinson*, 30.

establishment, while the Presbyterians were growing increasingly opposed to any form of Erastianism. Keith Jordan Hardman notes,

[The] debates were not idle exercises in rhetoric, as most people would regard them today, but rather vital to survival. Too many Presbyterians with their toehold in the middle colonies at the turn of the 18th century had bitter memories of events only too recent to allow for good feeling. The Anglicans felt the same. To them the Presbyterians were keen reminders of nonconformity, Cromwellianism, the solemn league and covenant, and many other expressions of determined hostility and opposition.<sup>6</sup>

In Dickinson's Elizabethtown, there was only one other congregation, the Anglican church that had been established in 1703, while young Dickinson was away at the Collegiate School.<sup>7</sup> In his report that year to the Anglican's Society for the Propagation of the Gospel among the Heathen, the evangelist George Keith reported that he had found many who had been, "a sort of Independent, well affected to the Church of England."<sup>8</sup> The Anglican presence around Dickinson's ministry compelled him to a twenty-year disturbance with them, by far his longest running dispute.

#### Dickinson and Presbyterian Ordination

In 1709, the same year Dickinson became pastor Elizabethtown, St. John's Anglican Church also installed a new pastor, Edward Vaughn. Dickinson and Vaughn had remarkably parallel ministries. Neither left their Elizabethtown congregations. Each served thirty-eight years, and both died the same week in 1747. Though it's possible the two maintained a cordial relationship, they were decidedly on opposite ends of church

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<sup>6</sup> Keith Jordan Hardman, "Jonathan Dickinson and the Course of American Presbyterianism, 1717-1747" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1971), 70. See also Leonard J. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition: A Re-Examination of Colonial Presbyterianism* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1949), 228.

<sup>7</sup> Edwin Francis Hatfield, *History of Elizabeth, New Jersey* (New York, NY: Carlton and Lanahan, 1868), 297-298.

<sup>8</sup> Le Beau, *Dickinson*, 67. George Keith had once been a Presbyterian, then became a Quaker over sharp disagreement with Presbyterian leadership, then became an Anglican for the same problems with Quaker leaders.

and civil affairs. Vaugh held Dickinson and his fellow Presbyterians in relatively high esteem, noting that they had a certain non-rigid persuasion that reflected well on them. However, the Vaugh-Dickinson relationship in Elizabethtown was part of a much broader ecclesiastical and civil conflict agitating the middle colonies and kept the two churches from enjoying meaningful fellowship. In some ways they were competitors, each battling the other for the soul of American culture and American Christianity in their time.

They were, after all, on opposite sides not only of religious matters but of civil matters, as were the churches they represented. Their rivalry no doubt contributed to Dickinson's zeal as defender of his faith. One historian has written that Dickinson became fully alive due to Vaughn's efforts and another wrote that the Presbyterian-Anglican division in Elizabethtown was "the origin of the greatest animosity and alienation between friends, townsmen, Christians, neighbors, and relations that the town ever beheld, kindling a flame which was not to be extinguished until the conclusion of the Revolutionary War."<sup>9</sup>

Dickinson was the primary Calvinistic Dissenter against the Anglicans of his day, a relentless thorn in their side. When one considers what the Anglicans thought of the Presbyterians in "their" colonies, one can surely understand the mutual distaste. The Bishop of London had authority over the Anglican presence in America and received regular updates from those commissioned to the heathen lands. On one such occasion, around 1703, (though the exact date is uncertain), the bishop's representative, George Keith, urged for more ecclesiastical presence in the colonies, arguing that if the

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<sup>9</sup> Le Beau, *Dickinson*, 67. See also Samuel A. Clark, *The History of St. John's Church, Elizabeth Town, New Jersey: From the Year 1703 to the Present Time* (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott, 1857), 49. Here it is possible to note Jonathan Dickinson as an early anti-establishment advocate, sensing that the Church of England had grander visions for the colonies. He believed the loss of civil freedom in the colonies would almost certainly be tied to the loss of religious freedoms. This is the same concern that John Witherspoon held as he assumed Presbyterian leadership during the Revolution, "There is not a single instance in history when religious liberty was lost and civil liberty preserved entire." See John Witherspoon and John Rodgers, *The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men*, vol. 3, *The Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon, Vols. I-IV*, Second Edition, Revised and Corrected, (Philadelphia, PA: William W. Woodward, 1802), 36-37.

Anglicans delay establishment in America, “Dissenters would continue to freely exercise their influence over the religious lives of the population...creating, a Sodom of uncleanness and a pest house of iniquity.”<sup>10</sup>

When Dickinson learned that such a sentiment was likely to descend on Elizabethtown his alarm was elevated. Dickinson sensed that a movement was afoot to establish the episcopacy as the biblical and historical expression of the Christian religion in the colonies. As a result of his caution, he kept Vaughn and the Anglican presence in New Jersey at arm’s distance until, in September 1722, an event occurred that compelled him to contend for the faith. Several people connected to Yale College, including the rector, Timothy Cutler, defected to the Episcopacy, which in turn prompted an aggressive print campaign designed to bring Presbyterianism into disrepute and to elevate the supreme authority of the Anglican church.<sup>11</sup> Those who thus defected held a variety of opinions on the validity of Presbyterian ordination; from uncertainty to absolute persuasion of invalidity.<sup>12</sup> Dickinson considered the defections an affront to the purity of Presbyterianism in the colonies, which was confirmed with the publication of a pamphlet by a newly converted Anglican zealot entitled, *A Modest Proof of the Order and Government Settled by Christ and His Apostles in the Church*.<sup>13</sup> The pamphlet sought to

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<sup>10</sup> Le Beau, *Dickinson*, 65. The majority of appeals to London for an American bishop came from the middle colonies, one of which proposed a bishopric be centered very near Elizabethtown.

<sup>11</sup> Franklin Bowditch Dexter, *Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of Yale College with Annals of the College History, October, 1701-May, 1745* (New York, NY: Henry Hold and Company, 1885), 15.

<sup>12</sup> Dexter, *Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of Yale College*, 15-16. Dickinson knew some of the defectors personally, having graduated from Yale around the same time they did and having participated in Presbyterianism with them until they defected.

<sup>13</sup> John Checkley, *A Modest Proof of the Order & Government Settled by Christ and His Apostles in the Church. By Shewing I. What Sacred Offices Were Instituted by Them. II. How Those Offices Were Distinguished. III. That They Were to Be Perpetual and Standing in the Church. And, IV. Who Succeed in Them, and Rightly Execute Them to This Day.: Recommended as Proper to Be Put into the Hands of the Laity* (Boston, MA: Tho. Fleet, 1723), accessed August 7, 2023, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N02033.0001.001>.

prove that the biblical and patristic pattern of ecclesiology was the episcopacy, and that only the Anglican bishops had the authority to ordain ministers, thus claiming jurisdiction over the entire church.<sup>14</sup>

The significance of the claim was not lost on Dickinson. The Anglicans asserted that their bishops represented the line of succession from Christ; therefore, they alone possess the authority of ordained ministry and consequently they alone had authority to exercise spiritual jurisdiction in the universal church. For Dickinson, the dye was cast, and he was compelled to act. Combined with his knowledge that these same Anglicans viewed his and the rest of Presbyterian ministry as producing “a Sodom of Uncleanness and a pest house of iniquity,” Dickinson felt no choice but to engage in a Pamphlet War.

His opening salvo was a tract called, *The Defense of Presbyterian Ordination*, in 1722. Recall that in that same year, Dickinson was embroiled in an in-house debate over the nature of Synodical authority as it related to subscription requirements for Presbyterian ordination. There, he argued that the scriptures were fully sufficient to equip a man for pastoral office and to act as a judge on his worthiness. Against the Anglicans, he maintained his biblicist approach by answering, *A Modest Proof of the Order and Government Settled by Christ and His Apostles* with an appeal to scripture and to church history. One may detect in Dickinson a favored tactic against his opposers. Like in his debates with his fellow presbyters regarding subscription, he was keen to point to church history against his Anglican debate partner to support his case.

*Modest Proof* was almost certainly written by John Checkley, “perhaps the most

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<sup>14</sup> For more on the origins of *Modest Proof*, see Herbert L Samworth, “Those Astonishing Wonders of His Grace: Jonathan Dickinson and the Great Awakening” (Th.D Dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1988), 88.

notorious American Anglican polemicist” of the time.<sup>15</sup> By 1719, Checkley had grown concerned that few people in the middle colonies were properly schooled in the ways and divine rights of the Episcopacy. To alleviate his discomfort, he republished a version of *The Religion of Jesus Christ, the Only True Religion* by Charles Leslie. Clearly, his hopes were for a wider audience than it had originally received.<sup>16</sup> The next year, Checkley waded further into the Anglican-Presbyterian dispute by publishing his own work, though anonymously, entitled, *Choice Dialogues, Between a Godly Minister and An Honest Countryman, Concerning Election and Predestination*, which was far less about soteriology and far more about ecclesiology. Checkley was setting himself up as a strong advocate for the episcopacy and the rule of Anglicanism as the only legitimate expression of the Reformers’ faith.<sup>17</sup>

Checkley’s hardline enthusiasm for Anglican rule in America took an unexpected turn when, in 1722, he was refused Holy Orders upon a trip to London where he sought the same. Far from fleeing his faith, however, he returned to make aggressive moves toward the Presbyterians and remained under the pastoral care of the only Anglican minister in Connecticut, Samuel Johnson.

Checkley’s *Choice Dialogues* had received little attention in Boston, where virtually all those of a Reformed persuasion paid it no mind. However, his *Modest Proof* met a very different response,

Checkley's *Modest Proof* drew much more blood in 1723, so that at least four Congregationalists felt called upon to answer this persistent Anglican.

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<sup>15</sup> Le Beau, *Dickinson*, 68. Hatfield leaves *Modest Proof* as an anonymous document, but all later histories agree it was the work of Checkley. See Hatfield, *History of Elizabeth*, 332.

<sup>16</sup> Leslie’s *The Religion of Jesus Christ the Only True Religion* was published the same year, 1719. It was primarily aimed at reasoning against the influence of Locke’s deism, though in doing so he promoted the sole authority of the Anglican religion.

<sup>17</sup> Hardman, *Dickinson and the Course of American Presbyterianism*, 79-80.

Thomas Walters fired another salvo and Checkley's direction, and reinforcements were brought up to answer the widely circulating modest proof in the person of Edward Wigglesworth, of Cambridge, Thomas Foxcroft, of Boston's "Old Brick" First Church, and Jonathan Dickinson. Each of these men in turn attempted to silence Checkley with a pamphlet attack, and it stands as evidence of the widespread notoriety attending this growing literary battle that Dickinson in New Jersey was not only fully aware of the matter but felt that Checkley's writings were sufficient threat in the middle colonies to require an answer from his also, in *Defense of Presbyterian Ordination*.<sup>18</sup>

In *Modest Proof*, Checkley attempted an aggressive strategy to prove the divine right of the episcopacy with an appeal to church history and to scripture. He began with the story of a bishop and a philosopher; the former having persuaded the latter that both scripture and reason support the episcopacy. He then aimed to follow the same method and prove without a reasonable doubt that his ecclesiology was the biblical one.

I shall with God's Assistance, follow the Method of this holy Man, in giving as plain and impartial an Account of the *Order* and *Government* instituted by Christ and his Apostles in the Christian Church, as I am able to collect from the sacred *Records* of the New Testament, to which I purpose closely to adhere.<sup>19</sup>

He proposed four arguments, hoping to methodically persuade Dickinson and the Presbyterians in the same way the philosopher was persuaded by the bishop. First, he wanted to show that Christ instituted the office of bishop and passed it down to the apostles, who further instituted the same in the early church. He also wanted that the office of pastor and bishop were different, with the latter a superior position to the former. This was the primary area of dispute that Dickinson took up.

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<sup>18</sup> Hardman, *Dickinson and the Course of American Presbyterianism*, 80-81.

<sup>19</sup> Checkley, *Modest Proof*, 6-7, accessed August 7, 2023.

Checkley continued his proposals by asserting that the office of superior bishop is perpetual and that any faithful church must adopt the episcopacy. He concluded his argument by attempting to show the manner of succession and the right way to execute it.<sup>20</sup>

To this, Jonathan Dickinson answered with witty aggression. He found little honor in Checkley's pamphlet and unlike his debates with his fellow Presbyterians, he responded with a measure of disdain, even mockery at the weakness of his opponent's argument. His response was the aforementioned, *A Defense of Presbyterian Ordination*. For Dickinson, the purity of the Presbyterian Church was under attack, which called for a frontal assault in response.

Argument by argument, Dickinson worked to dismantle Checkley's assertion that Anglicanism was the only form of religion acceptable to Christ. Far from it being the only acceptable form of religion, Dickinson argued that Anglicanism wasn't an acceptable form at all. Checkley issued the charge that for fourteen hundred years the church operated under a prelate in apostolic succession, but that the Papacy had corrupted the line of succession only to be restored by Anglicanism. "The Church heard no noise about this for above 1400 years."<sup>21</sup> For Checkley, the first fourteen centuries saw no opposition to the concept of a prelacy, but that in the years preceding the Reformation, the prelacy became corrupt. For Checkley, the church has always known that the office of

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<sup>20</sup> Checkley, *Modest Proof*, 7, accessed August 7, 2023.

<sup>21</sup> Checkley, *Modest Proof*, 2, accessed August 7, 2023.

bishop is superior to that of presbyter. It's time to return to a pure Episcopacy so enjoyed by the church for centuries.

In response, Dickinson recalled his own knowledge of church history and marshalled his powers of reason,

[My opponent argues] 1) that the church government he contends for is the same with the Papal hierarchy according to the pattern of the Church of Rome before the year of Christ 1400. For until that, "there was no noise about this point of church government" nor was it suppressed by the Roman papacy. 2) That the usurpation and tyranny of the Roman papacy did not commence till the fifteenth century. For by this the government he (*illegible*) was suppressed and a secular power and dominion set up. But it is time I dismiss this "history" and consider another, no less remarkable.<sup>22</sup>

From there, Dickinson recalled that Calvin and the reformers offered no support for the argument made by Checkley,

For does not everybody know that the divine right of prelacy was a doctrine unknown in all the foreign churches at the time of the Reformation? And that they universally maintained the identity of Bishop and presbyter? And hasn't the bitterest of our adversaries acknowledged this? Hear one of them, who after he had [opposed] Calvin, as the first founder of the Presbyterian principles proceeded "thus Geneva Lake swallowed up the Episcopacy."<sup>23</sup>

Dickinson noted that Checkley's argument refutes itself, because if it's true that the Prelacy had existed for the past 1400 years until now (that is, until the 18<sup>th</sup> century), then what of the first 300 years? A succession that began 300 years late is no succession at all. With a detectable irritation, he then recalled Jerome, Augustine, Chrysostom, Gregory of Nazianzus and many others as being men to assert the parity of bishops and presbyters, against Checkley's charge that church history knows and celebrates only the Prelacy.<sup>24</sup> He especially noted Gregory, "Would to God that there were no Prelacy, no

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<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Dickinson, *A Defense of Presbyterian Ordination: In Answer to a Pamphlet Entitled A Modest Proof of the Order and Government Settled by Christ in the Church* (Boston MA: [n.p.], 1724), 6.

<sup>23</sup> Dickinson, *A Defense of Presbyterian Ordination*, 7.

<sup>24</sup> See Hardman, *Dickinson and the Course of American Presbyterianism*, 82-83.

Prerogative of Place, no tyrannical privileges, that by virtue alone we might be discerned.”<sup>25</sup>

Dickinson’s concern in his *Defense of Presbyterian Ordination* was for the purity of the church, especially as it relates to Presbyterian pastoral office. The idea of hierarchy where, “scores, even hundreds” of churches may be under the care of a bishop, was repugnant.<sup>26</sup> He seized on this threat early in his rebuttal and never let go. A top-down hierarchy within Christ’s church simply could not go unchallenged if pure Presbyterianism was to survive its infancy. Dickinson knew the young Presbyterian church in the colonies could not stand against the well-resourced Anglican church unless the Presbyterians were well-healed in church history. It was surely his defense of Presbyterianism that registered Dickinson with the highest trust among his fellow presbyters.<sup>27</sup>

To conclude his rebuttal, Dickinson offered six arguments in support of the parity of bishops and presbyters, thus undoing Checkley’s exposition on the matter. In the first place, Dickinson showed that the scriptures ascribe an identity of office to both bishops and presbyters, especially from Acts 10:17-28 and 1 Peter 5:1-3. From there, Dickinson pointed to the Philippian church to note that the local church had a plurality of bishops/presbyters, thus bringing them on the same plane, contrary to Checkley’s idea of a ministerial hierarchy. His third argument appealed to Ephesians 4:11-12 to support his

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<sup>25</sup> Dickinson, *A Defense of Presbyterian Ordination*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Dickinson, *A Defense of Presbyterian Ordination*, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Bryan Le Beau speculates, “That Thomas Walter, Edward Wigglesworth, and Thomas Foxcroft, all of Massachusetts, as well as Dickinson, responded to Checkley, suggests the intercolonial nature of the quarrel. That Dickinson became the primary respondent in the ongoing debate reflects both the similarity of their response and the high regard in which Dickinson was held in both sections of the colonies.” See Le Beau, *Dickinson*, 70.

claim that Christ gave His church presbyters as the ordinary ministers of the gospel. Therefore, his fourth argument to support the parity of bishops and presbyters, thus the power of presbyters to ordain, was simply that 1 Timothy 4:14 says, “Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed on you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery” and is entirely indisputable. Fifth, Dickinson made the logical argument that if the apostles, as ordinary ministers of the gospel, were presbyters, then bishops could not be a superior or authoritative office to that of the apostles. Finally, his sixth argument established that if the bible makes no mention of bishops being superior to presbyters, then bishops and presbyters must be equal.

His growing impatience with Checkley is detectable in this concluding argument, “I challenge the world to show any mention of bishops [as] superior to presbyters in the book of God. It is therefore a just conclusion that there is no such thing.”<sup>28</sup>

In his *History of Elizabeth*, E.F. Hatfield summarizes the result of this initial skirmish with the Anglicans, noting that Checkley, though roundly defeated, was not one to give up,

His antagonist wholly unable to cope with him in argument called in the aid of his minister, Mr. Johnson, by whom he was furnished with a “sketch of the common argument in favor of the doctrine of the church of England”; which the other sent in his own name to Mr. Dickinson. This drew forth another publication from the latter, in which he affirmed that “high churchism” is properly no more a part of the Church of England than a wen is of the human body. To this also Mr. Johnson furnished his parishioner with a rejoinder. “Sometime after Mr. Dickinson enlarged and printed his own papers in this dispute; Upon which Mr. Johnson thought proper to publish what he had written on the other side.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> For the full set of arguments, see Dickinson, *A Defense of Presbyterian Ordination*, 40-42.

<sup>29</sup> Hatfield, *History of Elizabeth*, 332-333. Checkley and Dickinson exchanged pamphlets on the matter.

The skirmish with Anglicans was far from over. In the subsequent years, Dickinson continued to be agitated by the assertion of Prelacy in the middle colonies, although the record may show that it was Checkley who was agitated with his inability to defeat Dickinson. There were at least three more sets of replies exchanged between the two, until Checkley concluded in, *A Letter to Jonathan Dickinson*, that Dickinson should simply mind his own business, having labeled him a trifler (which is ironic, since Checkley poked Dickinson in the first place) and wishing the Presbyterians would disown him. He concluded his argument with an exasperated dagger tossed at Dickinson, hoping that truth would, “stand alone against all the assaults...made upon it by impotent malice, venom, disordered brains, petulance and ignorance, empty skulls, profane ribaldry, and saucy puny scribblers.”<sup>30</sup> To this, Dickinson did not respond. Clearly, he no longer considered Checkley a worthy opponent.

The issue lobbed between the sides in the Anglican-Presbyterian debate continued to orbit around ordination, church authority and order. Dickinson published two more pamphlets on this subject, though not aimed at Checkley any longer: *The Scripture Bishop* (1732)<sup>31</sup> and its follow-up, *The Scripture Bishop Vindicated* (1733)<sup>32</sup>, in

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<sup>30</sup> John Checkley, *A Letter to Jonathan Dickinson* (Boston, MA: [n.p.] 1725), 10-12. Quoted also in Le Beau, *Dickinson*, 75-76. For more on John Checkley and the Anglican emergence in the middle colonies see Thomas C. Reeves. “John Checkley And The Emergence of The Episcopal Church in New England.” *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 34, no. 4 (1965): 349–60.

<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Dickinson, *The Scripture Bishop, or, the Divine Right of Presbyterian Ordination and Government; Consider'd in a Dialogue between Prelaticus and Eleutherius, Examined in Two Letters to a Friend* (London: [n.p.], 1733).

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Dickinson and Thomas Foxcroft, *The Scripture-Bishop Vindicated: A Defence of the Dialogue between Praelaticus and Eleutherius, upon The Scripture-Bishop, or the Divine Right of Presbyterian Ordination and Government: Against the Exceptions of a Pamphlet, Intituled, The Scripture-Bishop Examin'd* (Boston, MA: S. Kneeland & T. Green, for D. Henchman in Cornhill, 1733).

which he advocated for the classical Presbyterian idea that the biblical terms for bishop and presbyter refer to the same office.<sup>33</sup> He was jealous for biblical polity, believing the purity of Gospel ministry was at stake. He took the opportunity this time to add another dimension to his historically based argument in favor of Presbyterian polity, namely, the origins and a justification of Presbyterian dissent in England against the laws of conformity.<sup>34</sup>

Dickinson was eager to contend for the purity of the Presbyterian church against the threat of the episcopacy.<sup>35</sup> In his defense of Presbyterianism in the mid 1730's, on the eve of the Great Awakening, Dickinson echoed his earlier arguments in the subscription debates that the scripture alone is fully sufficient for all things. This was his biblicist approach. In the earlier debates, he believed scripture was sufficient fully to

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<sup>33</sup> *The Scripture Bishop Vindicated* is published under Dickinson's pseudonym, Eleutherius. V.D.M.

<sup>34</sup> For further reading on the differences between *Defense of Presbyterian Ordination* and *The Scripture Bishop*, see Le Beau, *Dickinson*, 76-80.

<sup>35</sup> Dickinson's confrontation with the Anglicans was not limited to the issue of polity, but also touched on the issue of worship. On June 2, 1736, he preached a sermon that earned the ire of the Anglicans in New Jersey called, "The Vanity of Human Institutions in the Worship of God" from Mark 7:7. This sermon took direct aim at the high-churchism of the episcopal worship services arguing specifically that Anglican worship was vain because, among other things, they imposed terms of communion foreign to the bible and focused the attention of their congregants on the rituals of man. He argued that rituals of Anglican worship tended to root out vital piety. The great concern of this skirmish with his Anglican neighbors was to show that men tend to spend their energies on what they exalt. For Dickinson, this was the primary problem with all formal religion, because forms and ceremonies tend to produce a dead faith by tempting sinners to rest in the exercise of their worship service rather than resting in their vital union with Christ. This was, for Dickinson, the very reason for the reformation and so Presbyterians should not join in any Anglican exercises. In this way, one can see how Dickinson's New Side sympathies as they related to experiential religion preceded the dawn of the Great Awakening. Over against forms of religion, Hebert L. Samworth notes how Dickinson established the standard for early American Presbyterianism, "which was that the Word of God must have the supreme place in the church of Jesus Christ." See Samworth, "Those Astonishing Wonders of His Grace," 72-74. See also Jonathan Dickinson, *The Vanity of Human Institutions in the Worship of God. A Sermon Preached at Newark, June 2. 1736.: To Which Are Added, Some Little Enlargements. / By Jonathan Dickinson, M.A. Minister of the Gospel at Elizabeth Town, in New-Jersey.; [Three Lines from Galatians]*, 1736, accessed August 3, 2023, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N03296.0001.001>. The agitation Dickinson created by his sermon was significant. In response to Anglican outrage, he published two vindications, the first is now lost. The second is Jonathan Dickinson, *The Reasonableness of Nonconformity to the Church of England, In Point of Worship. A Second Defense of a Sermon, Preach'd at Newark, June 2, 1736* ([n.p.]: Gale Ecco, Print Editions, 2010).

equip a man for the ministry without the need for a confession of faith to affirm his beliefs. In the worship debates he believed scripture was sufficient for the spiritual health of a congregation in worship. Herbert L. Samworth rightly argues that it is important for any understanding of Dickinson's ministry to note the standard he was trying to establish for American Presbyterianism, "which was that the Word of God must have the supreme place in the Church of Jesus Christ."<sup>36</sup> This is particularly important because of his context. In the years preceding the Great Awakening, the spiritual climate in the colonies was declining, which further compelled Dickinson to stand on the Word of God as the sole authority and sufficiency in matters of life and godliness and not rely on forms and ceremony, which likely lead people to trust in the commandments of men.<sup>37</sup>

Dickinson's approach to the Anglican challenge sheds light on the religious, intellectual debates among the two most prominent sects of the early colonies. For Dickinson, the primary thing for the health of the church and society was a pure, representative, biblical Presbyterianism. This is especially interesting to church history insofar as Dickinson's era may be seen as the end of puritanism, which would soon give way to a much more independent spirit of American Christianity influenced by a rising sense of monarchical abuses and the secularizing tides of the enlightenment.<sup>38</sup> The Samuel Hemphill trial, Dickinson's next major controversy, may well be noted as the

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<sup>36</sup> See Samworth, "Those Astonishing Wonders of His Grace," 72–74.

<sup>37</sup> For a summary of the spiritual condition of the colonies before the Great Awakening, see Alan Heimert and Perry Miller, *The Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1978), xvii–xxiv. See also chapter one of, Joseph Tracy, *The Great Awakening: A History of the Revival of Religion in the Time of Edwards and Whitfield* (Boston, MA: [n.p.], 1842). Tracy's *The Great Awakening* is not page numbered. See also Hardman, *Jonathan Dickinson*, 128–136.

<sup>38</sup> For more on the early 18<sup>th</sup> century as the end of puritanism, see Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, *Meet the Puritans* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 193.

transitional event that moved American Presbyterianism out of the puritan era and into a new age of societal prominence.

Prior to the Hemphill trial, there is scarce record of deism verses Presbyterianism in the public square. Following the trial, the goings-on of Presbyterianism took on a popular and more uniquely American trait. As the Presbyterian church in the colonies made that transition, it fell largely to Dickinson to maintain the health of the church against the challenge of schism.<sup>39</sup>

### **The Threat of Schism: The Samuel Hemphill Trial and Fallout**

The middle years of the 1730s saw Dickinson contend for the purity and unity of the church within his own ranks, as well. By the time the Samuel Hemphill matter arose, the church was thinly united. Disagreement, or at very least uncertainty, over the meaning of the Adopting Act further advanced the two sides growing within.

In 1734, Hemphill arrived at Philadelphia from his native Ireland with ordination and recommendations in hand. As was custom, he was asked to subscribe again to the Westminster Standards according to the formula of 1729, to which he gladly obliged.<sup>40</sup> Within a year, however, everything for Hemphill and the Synod of Philadelphia would become severely strained. Dickinson would, once again, be called upon to contend for the purity and unity of the church.

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<sup>39</sup> This would become increasingly important in the following decades as mass immigration of Scottish and Irish Presbyterians placed greater strains on pre-revolution American Presbyterianism. For more on eighteenth century transatlantic Presbyterianism, see Thomas H. L. Cornman, *Caterpillars and Newfangled Religion: The Struggle for the Soul of Colonial American Presbyterianism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc, 2003), 9–21.

<sup>40</sup> William S. Barker, “The Hemphill Case, Benjamin Franklin and Subscription to the Westminster Confession,” *American Presbyterians* 69, no. 4 (1991): 243–256.

### Dickinson and the Hemphill Trial

Jedidiah Andrews, pastor of the Philadelphia Presbyterian Church, was experiencing enough growth in his church that he petitioned Synod for an assistant minister.<sup>41</sup> Though some were in favor of Dickinson, others favored Robert Cross of Jamaica, Long Island.<sup>42</sup> Given the importance of all parties involved and the solemnity of the call, the Synod delayed an appointment of either. The plan was for Synod to return to the matter in 1737. In the interim, the newly arrived Samuel Hemphill was appointed to assist Andrews.

Within a year of arriving in the colonies, and before joining Andrews in Philadelphia, Hemphill preached two sermons in Chester County that rattled the confidence of his fellow churchmen, for they each contained sympathies for Arianism and Deism.<sup>43</sup> He was quickly summoned to the Presbytery of Newcastle, under whose jurisdiction the Chester County church fell, to answer the charges of heresy. For reasons unknown to history, he was cleared of all charges and set free to continue his ministry in Philadelphia upon his appointment there.

In Philadelphia, Hemphill's heterodoxy was again causing increasing alarm. In June 1735, Jedidiah Andrews wrote of his concern that Hemphill's heresy may well represent the death of Christianity in the colonies. His only hope was that Christians

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<sup>41</sup> In the earlier years of Presbyterianism, a Synod was responsible to send a minister it believed qualified and suited to a congregation in need, although the preferences of the local church were taken under consideration. In contemporary Presbyterianism in America, it falls to the local church to identify the candidate of its choosing, then petitions its Presbytery for approval.

<sup>42</sup> Cross expressed interest in the position. There is no record of Dickinson having any interest. That the Philadelphia congregation petitioned for Dickinson speaks to his approval ratings in the churches.

<sup>43</sup> Le Beau, *Dickinson*, 45. This was not Hemphill's first trouble with doctrine. While a probationer in Ireland he preached at a vacant pulpit in Burt and alarmed Rev. Patrick Vance by his erroneous doctrine. Soon after, at Hemphill's ordination trials, Vance remained silent on the matter but raised awareness in private as to Hemphill's orthodoxy. For more on Vance and Hemphill, see Webster, *History*, 416.

would be spiritually enlivened enough to resist the pull of pleasant sounding, moralistic Christianity. Otherwise, all that would be left is a sinking ship. Andrews was so distraught over the leaven of Hemphill's heresy that he considered this to be the greatest challenge he had ever faced,

It has been since last November the most trying time with me that I ever met with. There came from Ireland at that time one Mr. Hemphill to sojourn in town for the winter as was pretended till he could fall into business with some people in the country; though some think he had other views at first, considering the infidel disposition of too many here. Some desiring that I should have assistance, and some leading men not disaffected to that way of deism, as they should be, that man was imposed on me and the congregation. Most of the best of the people were soon so dissatisfied that they would not come to meeting. Freethinkers, deists, and nothings, getting a scout of him, flocked to hear. I attended all winter, but, making complaint, brought the ministers together, who acted as is shown in the books I sent you.<sup>44</sup>

Hemphill had a very different take on his preaching ministry in Philadelphia. He said that Andrews invited him to preach every day and that because he (Hemphill) was drawing large crowds, Andrews grew jealous and actively sought to undermine his ministry with accusations of heresy by visiting house to house all those from the Philadelphia Presbyterian Church.<sup>45</sup> Trouble had come to the synod's most important church.

Among those who frequented Hemphill's preaching ministry was a twenty-nine year old Benjamin Franklin, a known advocate for the deism Andrews decried and a pew holder at his church.<sup>46</sup> Franklin considered Andrews preaching to be lifelessly doctrinal, dull, and unedifying. To Franklin, Andrews' sermons were perfectly suited to produce

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<sup>44</sup> Webster, *History*, 417.

<sup>45</sup> Webster, *History*, 417.

<sup>46</sup> Barker, "The Hemphill Case," 246.

faithful Presbyterians but not at all useful in making good citizens, which was Franklin's bigger concern.<sup>47</sup> The preaching of Hemphill, however, was far more pleasing. While Franklin approved of Hemphill's preaching, he was decidedly less impressed by his writing ability. To help advance Hemphill's popularity in Philadelphia and in defense of his ministry, Franklin, "lent him his pen," meaning he became something of a ghostwriter for Hemphill. The firestorm of controversy in the church was soon to affect the whole society.<sup>48</sup> It set up a battle for the purity of the Presbyterian church. Merton Christenson summarized it in as simple of terms as possible: it was deism verses Presbyterian Orthodoxy.<sup>49</sup>

On April 10, 1735, with the question of Presbyterian orthodoxy in the air, Franklin published, *Dialog Between Two Presbyterians* in which he argued that Hemphill was perfectly able theologically to remain a Presbyterian minister in good standing. He knew the developing issue was centered on Hemphill's having adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith in the form prescribed in 1729. He argued that it was hypocritical for the Presbyterians to require subscription to that document if Hemphill's conscience objected.<sup>50</sup>

One week later, on April 17, the standing commission of the Synod of Philadelphia began its trial of Hemphill, the first heresy trial in American

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<sup>47</sup> See Le Beau, *Dickinson*, 46.

<sup>48</sup> Barker, "The Hemphill Case," 246.

<sup>49</sup> Merton A. Christensen, "Franklin on the Hemphill Trial: Deism Versus Presbyterian Orthodoxy," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (1953): 422–40.

<sup>50</sup> The full manuscript of *Dialog Between Two Presbyterians* may be found at the National Archives Online Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-02-02-0006>, accessed September 20, 2023.

Presbyterianism.<sup>51</sup> Among those appointed to the commission was Jonathan Dickinson, who participated in the preliminary work but was not present for the eleven-day trial.<sup>52</sup>

Jedidiah Andrews brought the charges of heresy against Hemphill to the commission and presented the chair, Ebenezer Pemberton, eight articles containing the accusation of Hemphill's errors. The most serious of the charges included that Hemphill preached 1) that conversion is unnecessary for those brought up in a religion home, 2) that the Lord's Supper is a means to promote a virtuous life but that the believer has no communion with Christ, 3) that faith and obedience are identical and 4) that when Christ is preached, it is a means to stir up enthusiasm with the hearers and not as the remedy for sin and divine judgement.<sup>53</sup>

As the trial began, tensions were extraordinarily high. Andrews stated that if he was mistaken in his impression of Hemphill's doctrine, he would be happy to remove the accusations. However, that would mean Hemphill's sermon manuscripts should be turned over. Thus, the commission demanded to see the notes of Hemphill's sermons referenced in Andrews's accusations, which were at first refused on the grounds that the notes would show only a portion of the full sermon. Hemphill's argument was that the commission did not prepare him ahead of the trial to produce the manuscripts, so producing only the notes would rob Hemphill of the opportunity to display the full

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<sup>51</sup> The commission of Synod was established each year to handle judicial matters that may arise between Synod meetings. The commission was clothed with authority and populated with different men each year. They could render judgment, which judgment required approval at the next Synod.

<sup>52</sup> The rest of the commission makeup is ecclesiastically interesting because six of the eight members of the 1729 committee that forged the Adopting Act compromise were also six of the eight appointed to the Hemphill commission. The two most interesting 1735 commissioners are Jonathan Dickinson and John Thomson, because they represented the two sides in the subscription debates six years earlier. For the two of them, and for the whole 1729 committee to agree on the eventual outcome and accompanying reasons in the 1735 Hemphill affair speaks to the unity they were able to forge without violating their own principles.

<sup>53</sup> Webster, *History*, 417-418.

sermons and the context of the troubling remarks. He also objected that no man should be forced to produce evidence that will be used against him in a case of process. In the end, over his objection, Hemphill's notes were handed over for evidence against him.<sup>54</sup>

Hemphill further plead that he did sincerely and honestly subscribe to the Westminster Standards, as he was accused of violating the theological standards of the Presbyterian church by his deistic tendencies. He asserted that the Synod had not identified which articles they considered to be essential, thus he could not be held accountable for violating them.

After three days of hearings, the commission paused its work for the Lord's Day. Ebenezer Pemberton, Robert Cross, and George Gillespie each preached to their fellow commissioners about the needs for theological limits, the dangers of theological error and the importance of good Presbyterian order in the Synod. These sermons infuriated Hemphill and Franklin because, in their view, they conditioned the commissioners against Hemphill.<sup>55</sup>

The method the commission took during the trial was to compare the sermon notes provided by Hemphill against the accusations brought by Andrews. They went point by point for eleven days, excluding Sundays.<sup>56</sup> On April 26, upon reviewing the notes against the accusations, the commission ruled his doctrines to be "unsound and dangerous" and "contrary to the Scriptures and our excellent Confession and

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<sup>54</sup> Christensen, "Franklin on the Hemphill Trial," 428.

<sup>55</sup> Hemphill and Franklin's frustration over these sermons may be understandable. George Gillespie's sermon was entitled, "A Treatise Against the Deists or the Free-Thinkers: Proving the Necessity of Revealed Religion." Robert Cross entitled his sermon, "The Danger of Perverting the Gospel of Christ."

<sup>56</sup> Christensen, "Franklin on the Hemphill Trial," 431.

Catechism.”<sup>57</sup> The censure of suspension from office was pronounced until at least the September meeting of Synod when the commission would present its findings to the whole court.

#### Dickinson and the Hemphill Fallout

Benjamin Franklin took to publishing objections to both the process and the ruling in a tract called *Some Observations on the Proceedings against the Rev. Mr. Hemphill; with a Vindication of His Sermons*. Franklin asserted that the Commission failed to understand Hemphill in his context. They prejudged Hemphill based on letters exchanged between men who had never heard him preach. These men then, according to Franklin, conditioned the Synod to stand against Hemphill. Far from denying conversion, Franklin believed Hemphill to have preached in a way, much to his own liking, that promoted a gospel where conversion of those brought up in a virtuous home, which Franklin called a “Christian country” would naturally experience spiritual growth and qualify them for heaven. It is unknown if Hemphill would have agreed with Franklin’s assessment, but Franklin’s commentary did not help Hemphill’s cause. Franklin further asserted, this time with Hemphill’s assent, that he had subscribed to the Westminster Confession of Faith, but only to its essentials. Franklin argued that the Synod itself had not declared what it believed to be the essential and fundamental doctrines, therefore Hemphill could not reasonably be held accountable for preaching contrary to them.

Franklin then turned his attention, albeit without naming names, to Jonathan Dickinson. He asserted that Dickinson and the anti-subscription men were right in their

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<sup>57</sup> Melvin H. Buxbaum, *Benjamin Franklin and the Zealous Presbyterians* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975), 97. See also Le Beau, *Dickinson*, 51.

insistence that subscription was unimportant, even noting that those who were most zealous for full subscription in 1729 agreed that there were articles in the confession of no great importance. Therefore, according to Franklin, it is reasonable to conclude that the Commission was engaging in an inquisition meant to defend one of their own, namely Jedidiah Andrews and his lifeless preaching.<sup>58</sup> Franklin characterized the work of the Commission as something related to, “that hellish tribunal, the Inquisition.”<sup>59</sup>

#### Jonathan Dickinson vs. Benjamin Franklin

With the credibility and reputation of the Presbyterian Church in danger of decline, the commission appointed Jonathan Dickinson to represent them to society. It was a delicate matter that needed a deft touch. What they didn’t expect was for Dickinson to correct a glaring error that infuriated Hemphill and Franklin.

Before Franklin’s *Observations* was released, the commission published its censure against Hemphill in a pamphlet. Hemphill noticed that the commission’s telling represented only an extract of the record, which Franklin correctly pointed out. It consisted, “almost exclusively of samples from Hemphill’s sermons and its notes on how they were evidence of the charges brought against him. Testimony by Hemphill or on his behalf was not included.”<sup>60</sup> When he wrote, *A Vindication of the Reverend Synod in Answer to Some Observations on their Proceedings against the Reverend Mr. Hemphill*,

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<sup>58</sup> For more on the work of the Commission and Franklin’s assertions, see Le Beau, *Dickinson*, 51-52. Franklin’s approach was primarily to show that although the members of the Commission may disapprove of Hemphill’s ministry and preaching, it would be reasonable to conclude that his preaching was consistent with the Synod’s standards. For the full transcript of Franklin’s *Observations*, see “Founders Online: Observations on the Proceedings against Mr. Hemphill, [17 July 1735],” <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-02-02-0009>, accessed September 20, 2023.

<sup>59</sup> Franklin, *Observations*, accessed September 20, 2023. <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-02-02-0009>.

<sup>60</sup> See Le Beau, *Dickinson*, 200, footnote 15, and Franklin, *Observations*, accessed September 20, 2023. <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-02-02-0009>.

Dickinson attached the complete texts of the extracts earlier published, taken from Hemphill's full sermons in question, so that the work of the commission could be more fully explained and understood by all onlookers.

This was the classic Jonathan Dickinson. He was keenly aware that the matter before him was thorny, and that Presbyterianism was beginning to take its place in American society. If the community, and especially the rest of Synod, was in sharp disagreement with the decision of the commission's work on a heresy trial, then an even sharper distrust would almost certainly invade the fellowship and that Presbyterianism would have a declining attraction. He also knew that he was not a part of the actual proceedings in question. He demonstrated the fullest trust in the work of his brothers to preserve the purity and unity of the church. Once again, for Dickinson, the need for limits ran parallel to the need for order in the church.

In his defense of the commission's work, he also defended the character of the men on the commission. Franklin had alleged hypocrisy among them, noting that though they found Hemphill guilty of confessional violations, they were themselves, earlier, indifferent to confessional integrity. In response, Dickinson, while never agreeing with the charge of indifference, conceded that, "the nature of the debate concerning ministerial subscription had changed considerably since 1729."<sup>61</sup> He wrote,

The prodigious growth of errors and infidelity has long been a matter of melancholy complaint; And the frequent attempts that have been made in this unhappy age to undermine the great doctrines of the gospel have justly filled the minds of all serious persons with horror and surprise. Those who have had a tender regard for the common interest of religion and a desire that it might be propagated to posterity pure and uncorrupted, have thought themselves obliged vigorously to appear in its defense, and courageous to

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<sup>61</sup> Le Beau, *Dickinson*, 52-53.

resist the torrent of irreligion that seems to threaten the destruction of the Christian world.<sup>62</sup>

Dickinson had hoped that the errors of the broader Christian community, especially the influence of deism, could be kept at bay in the young Presbyterian communion. The enlightenment was encroaching, and he sensed the need to put down an anchor for the church to better protect its purity. This was the point, because of the Hemphill trial and the horror he witnessed of deism in the church, that he defended the requirement for ministerial subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith, representing a reversal of his earlier anti-subscription stance.<sup>63</sup> He was seeing the value of subscription not as a guarantee of orthodoxy but as a legitimate means of disciplining heretics within the ranks of the church. For Dickinson, it did not matter that the synod had never delineated those articles it considered fundamental, as Hemphill asserted. Rather, by virtue of the adopting act, synod reserved the right to judge each minister's qualifications upon his assent to the Standards. Dickinson pointed out that Hemphill subscribed to the confession upon his arrival from Ireland without a single exception or scruple and that he later preached sermons that contradicted his own doctrine. This became the focal point of the dispute between Dickinson and Franklin.

A significant piece to Dickinson and the Hemphill fallout is that it sheds light on the how church of the mid-1730's understood the Confession was to be used in their courts. Franklin asserted that Hemphill should not have been held accountable for any of his views because whatever exceptions to the confession he may have taken were only connected to the essential and necessary articles. Those articles, according to Franklin,

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<sup>62</sup> Jonathan Dickinson, *A Vindication of the Reverend Commission of the Synod in Answer to Some Observations on Their Proceedings* (Philadelphia, PA: Andrew Bradford, 1735), 1.

<sup>63</sup> Le Beau, *Dickinson*, 52-53.

were never delineated. Dickinson's *Vindication of the Reverend Synod*, however, pointed out a key fact: Hemphill took no exceptions at all. He wrote,

We cannot overlook without some Remarks, this surprising Narrative here given, and elsewhere repeated, that all he declared to at his Admission into the Synod, were the fundamental Articles of the Confession of faith. When, it is certainly true, and can be attested by above Forty Members of the Synod then present, that he solemnly Declared his Assent to every Article in the Westminster Confession of Faith, and in the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, without one Exception; and assured us, he had before Subscribed the same in Ireland.<sup>64</sup>

Dickinson went on in the subsequent pages to note how the 1729 Synod came to a unanimous decision that a version of good-faith subscription would be the method for the church. Key to Dickinson's position was that the synod, not a minister, would determine if any scruple fell into the category of "essential and necessary."<sup>65</sup>

Hemphill had the opportunity to declare any scruples he might have wished to take when he transferred from Ireland to the Synod of Philadelphia. Dickinson notes, "he was called upon to propose his objections, if he had any; but he replied he had none to make,"<sup>66</sup> For Dickinson, Hemphill had been dishonest by not reporting to Synod his actual beliefs on such matters of clear contradiction to the Confession.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Jonathan Dickinson, *A Vindication of the Reverend Commission*, 22. See also Charles Augustus Briggs, *American Presbyterianism*, 232.

<sup>65</sup> Dickinson, *A Vindication of the Reverend Commission*, 23-24.

<sup>66</sup> Dickinson, *A Vindication of the Reverend Commission*, 23-24.

<sup>67</sup> Five months before the 1729 Adopting Act took place, Dickinson wrote his friend and sparring partner John Thomson to say he believed that while subscription might have a positive effect on keeping heretics out of the Presbyterian communion, it will surely not detect secret heretics or provide a way to keep them out. The Hemphill trial proved that in this objection Dickinson was partly right and partly wrong. It would be true that subscription could keep heretics out. It would be equally true that heretics could remain concealed. However, both of those possibilities depended on ministers being forthright in their declarations. See S. Donald Fortson, *Colonial Presbyterianism: Old Faith in a New Land: Commemorating the 300th Anniversary of the First Presbytery in America* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2007), 68–69. That Hemphill was not forthright in his exceptions became a major point of contention between Dickinson and Franklin.

In his *Vindication*, Dickinson referred only to the morning minute of the Adopting Act to state how the church viewed subscription, namely, to give each minister opportunity for stating scruples. For Dickinson, the action of the morning minute at the Adopting Act proved to be sufficient in maintaining the purity of the church. Though he had his doubts in 1729 that subscription could root out heresy, he was pleased to see that by virtue of synod asking Hemphill for *any* scruples, the Adopting Act allowed for synod to prove Hemphill's heterodoxy. Dickinson's only lament was that Hemphill's dishonesty gave him license to preach heresy, if only until he was exposed.

William Barker notes that some scholars may object to the assertion that the morning minute accurately records the full sentiment of 1729. George Knight III argues this opinion by remembering that the Synods of 1730 and 1736 emphasize the afternoon minute, "This settled position of the Synods was also that which they followed and put into practice on both the Synod and Presbytery levels."<sup>68</sup> The Hemphill matter shows that the position was not as settled as asserted. It should be noted that after reviewing Dickinson's *Vindication*, Thomson himself agreed with it.<sup>69</sup> This is not surprising, because it was Thomson, in 1727, who first proposed that synod adopt the Confession as its standards, noting, "that if any minister within our bounds shall take upon him to teach or preach anything contrary to any of the said articles, unless, first, he propose the said point to the Presbytery or Synod, to be by them discussed, he shall be censured so and

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<sup>68</sup> George Knight, III, "Subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms" in David W. Hall, *The Practice of Confessional Subscription* (Oak Ridge, TN: Covenant Foundation, 2001), 124.

<sup>69</sup> See William S. Barker, "The Samuel Hemphill Heresy Case (1735) and the Historic Method of Subscribing to the Westminster Standards," in Hall, *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, 161–62. Dickinson drafted *Vindication*, then sent it to the commissioners for review before publishing it two weeks later.

so.”<sup>70</sup> The preface to Thomson’s 1727 proposal includes the important note, “if there should be any paragraphs or clauses at which some may scruple,” then the church courts could handle those scruples in, “a regular way,”<sup>71</sup>

By including the morning minute of the Adopting Act, Dickinson was signaling two things simultaneously. First, his clear belief was that all members of synod believed the 1729 Adopting Act intended to allow scruples to be taken by ministers and candidates and did not limit those scruples to the two chapters of the Confession that were subject of the afternoon minute. For Dickinson, any scruple must then be approved by synods or Presbyteries.<sup>72</sup> But he was also letting his readers know that the Presbyterians of the 1730s viewed pernicious theological errors as something to be redressed with force. He was keenly aware that congregants would be reading his defense of the commission’s work.<sup>73</sup> He feared Hemphill’s preaching promoted a kind of religion devoid of the need of Christ and of conversion, contrary to the confessional standards of the Presbyterian church. In response, he argued that the commission was perfectly within its rights to declare such preaching not only heterodox, but a danger to sensitive souls. He asserted that the Commission was obliged, in faithfulness to Christ and to the people in the pew,

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<sup>70</sup> John Thomson, *An Overture Presented to the Reverend Synod of Dissenting Ministers, Sitting in Philadelphia, in the Month of September, 1728 And Is Now Under the Consideration of the Several Members of the Said Synod, in Order to Come to a Determination Concerning It at Next Meeting: Together with a Preface, or an Epistle Containing Some Further Reasons to Strengthen the Overture, and an Answer to Some Objections against It* ([n.p.], 1729), 25. See also Charles Hodge, *The Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, Parts I-2* (Philadelphia, PA: William S. Martien, 1839), 167.

<sup>71</sup> Thomson, *An Overture*, 24.

<sup>72</sup> Dickinson notes in *A Vindication of the Reverend Commission* that Hemphill had been asked about taking any scruples to the Confession whatsoever, not to chapters twenty and twenty-three only. See Barker in Hall, *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*, 161.

<sup>73</sup> Scott Sealy notes that the laity within the bounds of Synod had a growing uncertainty about their ministers’ theological commitments. See Charles Scott Sealy, “Church Authority and Non-Subscription Controversies in Early 18th Century Presbyterianism” (Ph.D Dissertation, University of Glasgow, 2010), 182.

to exclude Hemphill on the grounds of his heretical views. For Dickinson and the commission, Hemphill's greatest crime was not just his heresy, but his dishonesty in subscribing to the Confession without scruple.

Dickinson realized that the threat of deism to the Presbyterian church was not altogether different from the threat Anglicanism represented insofar as both provided a worshiper an opportunity to rest on his own religious performance and thus to miss Christ. Neither pressed the need for vital religion of the heart. For the deist, virtue was king, and faith was merely a personal persuasion upon rational grounds. For the Anglican, pomp and ceremony took precedent and tempted the people to trust in the circumstances. This formalism continually raised the alarm for Jonathan Dickinson. He concluded his *Vindication* with a call to faith from his readers, exhorting them to,

Stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the Gospel, in nothing terrified but our adversaries, which is to them an evident token of perdition, but to us of salvation and that of God.<sup>74</sup>

Sometime after Dickinson's first *Vindication*, more news about Hemphill's preaching became available. A discerning listener recognized the sermons he had heard from Hemphill and learned they were previously preached by two ministers in England.<sup>75</sup> Hemphill's trial was over and so no charges of plagiarism were presented, but the plagiarism proved a problem even for Benjamin Franklin, who was able only to muster a sarcastic justification, "I rather approved his giving us good sermons composed by others

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<sup>74</sup> Dickinson, *Vindication*, 47-48. As part his conclusion, Dickinson offered forgiveness to Hemphill for the injuries he caused his fellow ministers and prayed for Hemphill's restoration to the ministry.

<sup>75</sup> William Barker names three preachers from whom Hemphill plagiarized. In response, Hemphill acknowledged that he had plagiarized, but only softly so, for he declared he was able to repeat a complete sermon someone else had preached upon only a single hearing. See Barker, "The Hemphill Case," 248.

than bad ones of his manufacture, though the latter was the practice of our common teachers.”<sup>76</sup>

Upon the Synod’s final approval of the commission’s work in September 1735, they took the following action, with Dickinson’s full support,

The Synod having notified Mr. Hemphill, that they intend this day to enter upon his affair, and he not appearing but sending a disrespectful and contemptuous letter in the following words:

"To the Rev. members of the Synod: "By way of answer to the notification which I received Saturday last, I have only to observe, that the dispute between the Synod and me being made public in the world, which was first begun by the commission, what I have at present to offer to the Synod, is contained in -an answer to the vindication of the reverend commission now in the press, and will be speedily published, and that I despise the Synod's claim of authority. Your humble servant, " SAMUEL HEMPHILL. " Monday morning. " P. S. I shall think you will do me a deal of honour, if you entirely excommunicate me."

The Synod, from the consideration of his contumacy in his words, his disregard of the censure of the commission, and rejecting our communion, do declare him unqualified for any future exercise of his ministry within our bounds, and that this be intimated to all our congregations by each respective minister. Approved *nemine contradicente* [without dissent]. The brethren appointed to justify the commission against any complaints from Mr. Hemphill, if he should publish any such, having complied with the commission's order in that matter, are desired by the Synod to continue to answer any further publications of Mr. Hemphill's or his friends in that cause, if they shall think it necessary.<sup>77</sup>

The commission found Hemphill guilty of contumacy and of rejecting the authoritative censures against him. The work of the commission was formally completed, though it gave the freedom to Dickinson to answer any future criticisms,

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<sup>76</sup> Barker, "The Hemphill Case," 249.

<sup>77</sup> *Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1706-1788* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Education and Sabbath-School Work, 1904), 117.

should he feel compelled to do so.<sup>78</sup> The matter may have rested there if not for Franklin's insistence on intellectual debate with Dickinson.

By 1732, Franklin was settled in his own beliefs, and one of them was his distrust, even disdain, for the Presbyterians of the middle colonies. Franklin had thirteen virtues that, if sincerely held and practiced, could produce what he called, "the perfect man."<sup>79</sup> However, these virtues could only truly exist in a society free from oppressive religious regulations. To Franklin, the Presbyterians' insistence on sound doctrine, even the very notion of a heresy trial, represented the sort of religious regulation that would halt the successes of his virtues and, therefore, threatened the peace of society. His flame was especially lit by the injustices, in his view, of the Commission's work to condemn Hemphill. For Franklin, the matter of Hemphill's unorthodoxy was of little importance. The troubling matter was that Hemphill had been determined to be a heretic prior to any judge in his case having heard a single sermon.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Dickinson was not the only person authorized to answer further criticisms. Synod divided that labor into two committees, one for the northern regions and one for the southern. Dickinson was the most prominent and trusted defender of the Synod's work, although it is worth noting that the other trusted presbyters to answer criticisms included John Thomson and John Pierson. With Dickinson and Thomson each assigned to represent the Synod in this most sensitive and important work, it sheds light on how whatever differences they had only five years earlier over subscription had been resolved enough to continue their mutual labors at the Synod level in defense of their work.

<sup>79</sup> For more on Franklin's thirteen virtues and his idea of the perfect man, see Buxbaum, *Benjamin Franklin and the Zealous Presbyterians*, 89–91.

<sup>80</sup> Franklin noted in his *Observations* that the American Presbyterians were unfairly conditioned by Hemphill's previous colleague in Ireland, Mr. Vance. Vance had sent the Americans a letter warning about Hemphill's heterodoxy, which was uncritically believed. For Franklin, though Andrews and others heard many sermons by Hemphill, it simply did not matter, for by then their opinion of him was already set. "Hemphill was represented by several ministers to be a new-light man, a deist, one who preached nothing by morality, a missionary sent from Ireland to corrupt the faith once delivered to the saints; in short, he was everything a persecuting spirit could invent; although neither they nor Vance ever heard him preach, nor did they know at that time but he was as full of enthusiasm and a persecuting zeal as themselves." See Franklin, *Observations*, accessed September 22, 2023, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-02-02-0009>.

Following Dickinson's *Vindication*, and while Synod was meeting to finalize its decision on the Hemphill censure, Franklin remained unsatisfied with the Presbyterians and published *Letter to a Friend in the Country*, in which he continued to flog the Presbyterian ministers.<sup>81</sup> His primary goal was to portray the ministers as power-hungry aggressors, citing them as, "too fond of Power to quit their Pretensions to it."<sup>82</sup> Franklin advertised his essay in his own *Gazette*, ensuring a significant readership. He called for a united opposition to the Presbyterians who wanted to keep people ignorant and enslaved to their own authority. Franklin went so far as to say the Presbyterians have, historically, almost always been wrong and that the laymen of the church should take caution not to be fooled by their shows of piety and morality; that in reality the ministers cared nothing at all for the good of their souls.

Franklin based his plea to public opposition to the Presbyterians on two grounds. First, church members' blind submission to the leadership of the church virtually always results in ignorance, error, and superstition. Franklin asserted a direct correlation between the degree of a person's submission to Presbyterianism and the degree of that person's ignorance of the faith.<sup>83</sup> Second, all ecclesiastical persecution in the world's history has arisen from church leaders having usurped power and authority from Christ, then using their usurped power to crush private citizens,

Let us then to the utmost of our Power endeavor to preserve and maintain Truth, Common Sense, universal Charity, and brotherly Love, Peace and Tranquility, as recommended in the Gospel of Jesus, in this our infant and growing Nation, by steadily opposing those, whose Measures tend to nothing less than utterly to subvert and destroy all. Nothing, in all Probability, can prevent our being a very flourishing and happy People, but

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<sup>81</sup> Benjamin Franklin, "Founders Online: A Letter to a Friend in the Country, [25 September 1735]," accessed September 12, 2023, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-02-02-0010>.

<sup>82</sup> Buxbaum, *Franklin and the Zealous Presbyterians*, 106.

<sup>83</sup> Franklin, "Letter to a Friend," Preface.

our suffering the Clergy to get upon our Backs, and ride us, as they do their Horses, where they please.<sup>84</sup>

To this, Dickinson responded with an essay of his own called, *Remarks upon a Pamphlet Entitled, A Letter to a Friend in the Country*, published in November 1735.

Dickinson sensed that Franklin had struck a chord with the laity and, perhaps more discouraging, with the ministers of the Synod of Philadelphia. Had the commission really done poorly? Was the Hemphill verdict an indictment on the young Presbyterian body's tendency toward power? Dickinson walked a tight rope in his reply, demonstrating his considerable aptitude in doing so.

*Remarks Upon a Pamphlet* was the clearest indication of Dickinson new-found stance on the importance of confessional subscription, although he continued to maintain the right of ministers to state their scruples, and for the higher courts to judge them.<sup>85</sup> He argued that it was right for private citizens to claim individual liberty when it came to the Christian faith, but also that the Presbyterian church, as a private society, maintained the right to demand theological standards from its ministers. If an individual has the right to private judgement on a matter, then so does the Presbyterian church, for the church represents a collection of private individuals. Here, Dickinson turned the tables on Franklin by asserting that it was Hemphill who was attempting to force his own views on the church, not the other way around, and that Synod had every right to guard its doctrine against what it deemed erroneous,

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<sup>84</sup> Franklin, "Letter to a Friend," Preface.

<sup>85</sup> Dickinson argued that the absence of creeds and confessions in the early church was no argument against their value, but rather only proves their need. His argument stressed that confessions of faith, far from causing divisions in the body, were developed by the church in response to divisions that had arisen in their absence. For more, see Charles Scott Sealy, "Church Authority and Non-Subscription Controversies in Early 18th Century Presbyterianism," 185.

As I may not impose my *Credenda* on other Men, neither may they impose theirs on me. If I think in my Conscience, *Arianism* (for Instance) unqualifies a Man for my Communion, must I be forced against my *Conscience*, to have either Christian or Ministerial Communion with such a Person? What then becomes of the *Freedom* and *Liberty* that this Author so strenuously argues for? And it may be here observed, that this Case is the same with respect to a *Religious Society*, as a single Person.<sup>86</sup>

Early in *Remarks upon a Pamphlet*, Dickinson raised the alarm of falling into the extremes, as he would later witness in the Great Awakening schisms. He wanted to steer the church between the twin dangers of laxity and tyranny, noting that to fall on either side would either, “open the door to infidelity” or, “make shipwreck of the faith as well as peace of our churches.”<sup>87</sup> He had come to believe that subscription with the possibility of scruples was the best safeguard against the extremes.

As Dickinson had experienced in the Checkley case, his opponent was agitated to the point of drawing personal attacks from him. In this case, Franklin’s companion publication to *Letter to a Friend*, published four weeks later, was vitriolic and unrestrained. In *A Defense of Mr. Hemphill’s Observations*, he accused the Synod, and Presbyterians as a whole, of demonism, filled with immorality and even lying to the public in hopes of silencing the good and humble Samuel Hemphill.<sup>88</sup> Presbyterianism was, therefore, the enemy of true Christianity. Melvin Buxbaum notes how Franklin stooped surprisingly low for a satirical response to Dickinson, undoubtedly because he felt his case was lost. Referring to the authors of the commission’s final report, he said,

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<sup>86</sup> Jonathan Dickinson, *Remarks upon a Pamphlet, Entitled, A Letter to a Friend in the Country, Containing the Substance of a Sermon Preached in Philadelphia, in the Congregation of the Rev. Mr. Hemphill. Wherein the Terms of Both Christian and Ministerial Communion Are so Stated, That All Impositions in Religious Concerns Are Exploded, a Proper Enclosure Proposed for the Security of Each Religious Society, and the Commission of the Synod Justified in Their Conduct toward Mr. Hemphill*, 1735, 15–16, accessed September 22, 2023 <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/N03214.0001.001>. See also Buxbaum, *Franklin and the Zealous Presbyterians*, 106-107.

<sup>87</sup> Dickinson, *Remarks upon a Pamphlet*, 2.

<sup>88</sup> See Buxbaum, *Franklin and the Zealous Presbyterians*, 108.

Asses are grave and dull Animals  
 Our Authors are grave and dull Animals; therefore  
 Our Authors are grave, dull, or if you will, Rev. Asses.<sup>89</sup>

Dickinson's response, his final correspondence on the matter, added little to the discussion. He published it under his pseudonym Obadiah Jenkins and the essay has the sense of attempting to bring the matter to a close while still getting the final word.

Dickinson's primary point was to show that Hemphill was not a worthy minister, not only because he had preached aberrant doctrines, but that those doctrines might not even have been his own. Dickinson pointed to three Irish ministers, known deists at the time, from whom Hemphill plagiarized. Following the 1735 trial, Hemphill got his wish and was removed from ministerial communion with the Presbyterians, having his reputation damaged beyond repair. For his part, Franklin successfully kept the Hemphill affair a present matter for the better part of a year, as was his desire, with the goal of diminishing the Presbyterians' faithful witness.<sup>90</sup> More than that, it was his goal to bring the credibility and competency of the Presbyterian ministers into question, because he believed a free society had no place for them.<sup>91</sup> In the end, however, it was Dickinson, on behalf of Synod, that gained the upper hand in the matter, because the church found a way to navigate the threat of corruption from the inside and, by defining and guarding its own limits, took a step toward a healthier communion.

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<sup>89</sup> Benjamin Franklin, "A Defense of Mr. Hemphill's Observations, [30 October 1735]," National Archives, accessed, September 20, 2023, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-02-02-0011>. Original source: Leonard W. Crabbtree, ed., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 2, *January 1, 1735, through December 31, 1744* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961), 90–126. See Buxbaum *Franklin and the Zealous Presbyterians*, 108.

<sup>90</sup> Buxbaum notes how carefully Franklin crafted his image as a benevolent deist in this autobiography. However, it is clear from his actual interactions with the Presbyterians as a younger man that his goal was to curb their influence in the burgeoning American society. In an irony that is hard to understand, Franklin left the Presbyterian church after the Hemphill affair but continued to support it financially while joining the local Anglican church.

<sup>91</sup> See Buxbaum, *Franklin and the Zealous Presbyterians*, 115.

## Conclusion

The Anglican challenge and the Hemphill affair show that Dickinson's moderation must be understood as situated in a broader context. Most scholarship is settled on Dickinson as a moderate. However, he never viewed himself as a moderate. Especially from his involvement in the Anglican and Hemphill crises, it is clear that he viewed himself as a caretaker of early American Presbyterianism. Dickinson was the key figure as Presbyterianism in the colonies transitioned from its puritan context to its American context. That transition created both cultural and ecclesiastical forces that were necessary for Dickinson to labor for the purity and unity of the church. On the one hand, those forces included the threat of Anglican dominance that Dickinson feared would have silenced the Presbyterian witness in the wilderness. On the other hand, the Presbyterians were threatened by the influence of aberrant theologies from within that would have corrupted the faith. It fell to Dickinson to see the church through the rocky years of the mid-1730s. Dickinson's role, less as a moderate, more as a caretaker, can be recovered for the contemporary Presbyterian Church in America as the denomination makes its way into a new era of similarly changing cultural and ecclesiastical influences.

Dickinson defended Presbyterian ordination and by extension Presbyterian polity, including even his willingness to promote subscription. He also defended Presbyterian worship and by extension Presbyterian congregational life. His method was twofold. First, to situate Presbyterianism in both its historical context as the inheritors of the church's past. And second, to situate Presbyterianism in its present cultural context against competing religions and practices by upholding its standards.

We can learn to do the same in our pursuit of the purity of the church. Dickinson could understand the history of the church only until his time, the 1700s. We have an additional 300 years of Presbyterian history from which to draw. His cultural context was pre-revolution colonial America, including Puritanism at dusk and the rise of Enlightenment dominance.<sup>92</sup> In that context he learned the contours of thought and responded with a word-centered apology. Ours is a post-modern context with fluid truth, or even a denial of its very existence. How can we respond but by anchoring our hope for the purity of the church in the ancient things of our faith; that is, by remembering the old paths. Those things are solid and provide reason to hope, especially because ours is a cultural moment that rejects foundations.

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<sup>92</sup> Though the end of puritanism is difficult to date, Joel Beeke identifies it as associated with Jonathan Edwards, Dickinson's contemporary. Similarly, the dawn of Enlightenment is difficult to pin down. The British Library identifies it as having begun at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, the time of Dickinson's birth. On the end of the Puritan era, see Beeke and Pederson, *Meet the Puritans*, 193. On the dawn of the Enlightenment, see <https://www.bl.uk/restoration-18th-century-literature/articles/the-enlightenment>, accessed September 22, 2023.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **TOWARD A HEALTHY PRESBYTERIANISM IN AMERICA**

Presbyterians in America have long struggled to achieve the purity and unity of the church. As the Presbyterian Church in American passes fifty years of existence, it is a denomination at a crossroads, and tensions are once again high. There are competing ideas and different animating principles that give shape to the current PCA. That should not be alarming. As American Presbyterians, we've been here before, and we have a wealth of experience from which to draw. Over three hundred years of churchmanship have taught us valuable lessons as we each try, with the help of divine grace, to promote the purity and unity of the church, as we have vowed. This project makes no claim to have found a lost formula that only needs implementation. The church is far too complex for simple formulas.

However, this project has aided my own ability to have a clearer sight of helpful steps toward a Presbyterianism that celebrates its purity and unity. How do we define church health? I suppose there is an endless parade of ideas to answer that. Most of them are good, but it is easy to get stuck in the traffic of too many good ideas. I will settle on this simple definition: The healthiest church is the church most carefully cultivated by its purity and unity.

There are two main lessons to be learned from the research of this project. The first is that becoming familiar with the colonial Presbyterian struggle for the purity of the church can prove a significant aid to the contemporary Presbyterian church. Knowing

one's history always helps one's present. The earliest leaders tried to build Presbyterianism against the tides of massively changing culture. It was a time of nation-building, global economic pressures and shifting ideas of truth and consequences, especially with the rise of the Enlightenment. Gone were the days of unquestioned assumptions. In their place was a new worldview that demanded reason and accountability. The modern era calls for the same exercise: to build a healthy Presbyterianism against rapidly changing culture. For instance, contemporary Presbyterians must labor in a culture that questions the very existence of truth itself.<sup>1</sup> As churches reach their culture with the gospel, the culture's ideas come through the doors and can weaken the church's convictions or alter the church's mission. That reality, in turn, tends to threaten the church's unity as leaders dispute how best to respond.

Jonathan Dickinson was the most important Presbyterian in America in its most foundational years. My research into his life and ministry compels me to believe the reason for his successful churchmanship over forty years was his commitment to drawing lines around his biblical and confessional convictions, while considering himself a caretaker of the church. This was his self-conception and it helped him know when to draw lines and when to be flexible. His recovery in a turbulent time can be a helpful guidepost to contemporary Presbyterians as they, too, try to rally around the purity and unity of the church.

The second major lesson is also historical in nature. The first three centuries of American Presbyterianism have produced three primary theological crises that have shaped the PCA from its founding. Those three crises centered on confessionalism,

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<sup>1</sup> For the modern world's allergy to truth claims, see David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 314–15.

mission, and the bible. If the PCA can cheerfully orient around its confessional commitments, maintain a robust understanding of the nature of the church, and increase its confidence in the inerrancy and sufficiency of the bible, it will be a major step on the road to a healthier church.

This chapter, then, aims to help the reader move in that direction, even if only in slight degree. In this chapter, I introduce a leadership training seminar with specific focus on the ordination vow of PCA elders and ministers to promote the purity and unity of the church. The purity and unity vow functions as a summary of all the others. This seminar is designed for the leadership of Surfside Presbyterian Church, though it is intended to be transferable to other settings. It consists of two teaching modules. First, church leaders will be taken on a guided tour through the key moments from the colonial Presbyterian struggle for a healthy church, with special focus on the life and ministry of Jonathan Dickinson. This module is entitled, “Let’s Go Back” and is designed to orient the leaders around the idea that Presbyterianism, with its many challenges, did not parachute into the twenty-first century. Dickinson’s role in the turbulent decades of the 1720 and 1730s is a helpful paradigm for the modern PCA context. For example, Surfside Presbyterian Church has a history of painful divisions and broken fellowship, mostly over competing ideas of what it means to be a Presbyterian church in the context of rapidly shifting cultural values, made even more challenging by its multi-generational fellowship.<sup>2</sup> Surfside is hardly unique in the PCA. The church has always struggled to

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<sup>2</sup> The challenge is made more difficult because there is a variety of opinions within the generations, themselves. For instance, some portion of the Baby Boomers at Surfside were spiritually formed in the Jesus Movement of the 1970s and wish for fewer theological distinctives. Other Boomers want greater boundaries around the distinctives of the reformed Presbyterianism of our heritage. On the other hand, some Millennials at Surfside are eager for classically reformed Presbyterian expressions of public worship, while other Millennials want to maintain the distinctives of our heritage while being open to fresh expressions of those distinctives.

know what boundaries to put up in its commitment to being reformed, but always reforming. These lectures aim at introducing the leadership to a similar challenge facing the earliest American Presbyterians with the goal of strengthening their confidence in their Presbyterian convictions by a fuller understanding of their foundation. There are four lectures in module one, each containing a key “Turning Point” that shows how the colonial struggle for a healthy church shaped the character for the future of Presbyterianism and can help inform us in our contemporary struggle for the same.

The second module is entitled, “Let’s Go Forward” and is designed to answer the, “what should we do next” question. Knowing the history of Presbyterian struggles is an important starting point, but more is needed if church leaders are to fulfill their vow on the purity and unity of the church. This module, then, consists of a modest applied theology of the purity and unity of the church, supported by a series of biblical, theological and historical rationale. The Surfside congregation has suffered from a lack of clear commitments to historically reformed Presbyterianism, which has stemmed from good-hearted leaders who have not always known what steps can be taken to promote the church’s purity and unity, as they have vowed. Over two decades of ordained ministry in the PCA leads me to conclude that that other churches across the denomination have encountered a similar challenge. It is recommended that these principles be prioritized and implemented as a way forward to a healthier Presbyterianism.

**Module One. Let’s Go Back: Jonathan Dickinson and the Colonial Struggle for a Presbyterian Church.**

*Big Idea: Dickinson should be recovered for his pursuit of both the purity and unity of the church. His example of unbending doctrinal resolve, meaningful theological reflection, and personal selflessness is the key to cultivating an environment of trusting churchmanship.*

Jonathan Dickinson, Lecture One.

- Early life and arrival at Elizabethtown, NJ
  - 1706: Dickinson graduates from Yale (first full class of graduates). Later (1747) becomes first President of the College of New Jersey (Princeton).
  - 1709: Marries Joanna Melyen and replaces her brother as pastor at Elizabethtown, NJ. It is the only church he would ever serve.
  - 1717 Dickinson on the rolls of Synod, a Presbyterian.
- The Colonial Setting
  - Emigration Patterns and the Irish and Scotch-Irish influence on early Presbyterianism.
    - Irish Non-subscription Controversies.
      - 1720: The Haliday Affair.
      - 1726: The Presbytery of Antrim excision over non-subscription.
    - Rising concern among some colonial Presbyterians over the fragile state of the early church, especially given the troubles on the continent.

Turning Point #1: How will the Presbyterian Church respond to the threat of schism so early in its existence?  
The Answer would set the trajectory for American Presbyterianism.

- 1720s debates surrounding church authority and the nature of Synodical power.
  - 1721: Dickinson elected as moderator, age 33.

- Dickinson feared Synod could unilaterally declare that full subscription would be required.
- 1722: Dickinson preached the opening sermon of Synod from 2 Timothy 3:17, arguing that Scripture teaches that the Word of God will thoroughly equip every man for the ministry and that required subscription is unlawful.
- 1722: Dickinson offered a compromise on the issue of limits of church authority whereby church courts would retain the right to exercise the keys of the kingdom but that lower courts would retain the right to decline directives if they were conscience bound on the matter. Should that happen, the lower court would appeal to the higher court.
  - This was unanimously adopted, prompting the 1722 Synod to sing Psalm 133 together, a tradition that continues in the PCA at every General Assembly.

### Jonathan Dickinson, Lecture Two

- The Subscription Controversy
  - Irish context: the Pacific Act.
  - 1724: Presbytery of New Castle required candidates to own the Westminster Confession as the confession of their faith.
    - John Thomson argued that this should be the standard for all Presbyteries.
    - Dickinson took the exact opposite view.

- Two parties were arising within the infant Presbyterian church.
- 1727: Thomson proposes that candidates should adopt the Confession to set theological standards for young Presbyterian church.
  - Often overlooked: his proposal allowed for scruples to be taken and tested against Synod.
- The Adopting Act

Turning Point #2: How will the Presbyterian Church handle the need for limits and order? The Answer would give character to American Presbyterianism for the rising generations.

- 1729: the issue of subscription was causing a deep divide in the church, threatening its ability to continue.
- September 19, 1729: The church adopts its Standards.
  - Dickinson is appointed to the committee to create a compromise between the non-subscribers and the strict subscribers.
  - Dickinson is the main architect of the Adopting Act Compromise.
    - Committee makeup shows the eagerness of the young Synod to find common ground that will satisfy the concerns of both parties.
    - The morning minute.
    - The afternoon minute.

- Controversy surrounding the precise relationship between the two sets of minutes.
  - Any scruples (Morning minute)? Or only to chapters 20 and 23 (Afternoon minute)?

Jonathan Dickinson, Lecture Three

Turning Point #3: How will the Presbyterian Church handle the theological errors of a minister who had fully subscribed?  
The answer would put confessionalism to the test.

- The Samuel Hemphill Affair: 1735
  - First heresy trial in American Presbyterianism: puts subscription to the test.
  - Hemphill:
    - Arrived from Ireland in 1734.
      - Subscribed to the Confession by adopting it as the confession of his faith. Emigrated to Philadelphia with assurances from Ireland.
    - Within a year he is charged with heresy.
    - The trial concludes with a guilty verdict and Hemphill is suspended, eventually withdrawing altogether.
    - The Hemphill affair shows cracks in the church's instinct to trust confessional commitments.

- What happens when men simply acknowledge the Confession as their own, but in reality, they are not committed to its doctrine?
  - This was the trouble with Hemphill: he was not honest in his affirmation of the Standards.
  - From 1735 to the present, Confessional Presbyterians should embrace the Standards:
    - As their own faith.
    - As the means of spiritual formation.
    - Regularly teaching its doctrines.
- Jonathan Dickinson vs. Benjamin Franklin
  - Franklin was a major supporter of Hemphill: he liked his deism.
    - Printed, *Some observations on the Proceedings against Hemphill*. Asserted that because the Synod did not define the ‘essentials’ of the Confession, Hemphill cannot be charged with violating them.
      - Dickinson responds with, *A Vindication of the Reverend Synod*.
        - Asserts a flaw in Franklin’s argument because Hemphill had taken no exceptions at all.
        - Dickinson refers only to the morning minute of the 1729 Adopting Act, by which Hemphill could have stated any scruples he wished.

- Franklin responds to Dickinson with, *Letter to a Friend in the Country*.
- Dickinson responds with, *Remarks upon a Pamphlet entitled, A Letter to a Friend in the Country*.
  - This represents the clearest indication of Dickinson's full support for subscribing to the Confession.
    - Dickinson came to believe that Subscription with the possibility of Synod-approved scruples could best steer the church through the twin dangers of theological laxity and ecclesiastical tyranny.
    - For Dickinson, this was the key to preserving the purity and unity of the church.

#### Jonathan Dickinson, Lecture Four

- 1739-1740: The Great Awakening
  - A growing sense that the reformed churches in the colonies began a slow slide toward formalism and dead orthodoxy.
    - A need for preaching to the heart (heart-religion)
      - Necessity of new birth.
      - This comes through preaching the word and through the operation of the Holy Spirit.

- Emphasis on holiness of life that flows from vital union with Christ by faith.
      - But the need to guard the church from error (a reformation principle) was always near.
      - New Side vs. Old Side Presbyterianism was firmly established.
- William Tennent
  - Dissatisfied with the slow progress of the gospel.
  - Saw a need to train ministers.
  - Yale was too Anglican and too far. Most other options were overseas.
    - 1735: Starts The Log College in Bucks County, PA.
  - The Log College was viewed as a training ground for radicals who upset Presbyterian governance and disregarded fellow pastors.
    - By 1736 two Presbyteries raised concerns over the training of the Log College men.
    - Examining committee established to ensure theological soundness of pastoral candidates.
      - Within 3 months of establishing the examining committee, New Brunswick Presbytery (New Side) was ordaining new pastors; considered an act of aggression by the Old Side.
  - Others saw The Log College as an avenue to produce men to preach the need for new birth and heart religion.
  - Log College graduates were exclusively pro-revival / George Whitfield supporters.

Turning Point #4: How will the Presbyterian Church respond to the spiritual awakening of a generation?  
 The Answer would characterize American Presbyterian preaching and mission for the next three centuries.

- Gilbert Tennent
  - Believed most people in the pews were in fact spiritually dead.
    - Also believed many preachers were unconverted.
      - 1739: The Dangers of An Unconverted Ministry.
- Tensions surrounding 4 main areas:
  - Subscription.
    - New Side fears subscription will bind the consciences of leaders.
    - Old Side fears without subscription chaos and liberalism are likely.
  - The education of ministers.
    - New Side: Impracticalities of Yale or overseas require creative solutions: the Log College.
    - Old Side: Proper education by recognized scholars is required to protect the church from error.
  - Itinerant Preaching.
    - New Side: Allows for heart-religion and calling for conversions.
    - Old Side: Disallowed because itinerant preachers are not held accountable for their preaching.
  - Responses to the Revival.

- New Side: Revivals are spiritual awakening and should be supported.
  - Old Side: Revivals are emotionalism.
- Dickinson's brand of New Side Presbyterianism
  - Respectful of the Old Side's concerns.
  - Skeptical of both extremes.
    - Exercises cautious optimism toward the revival.
  - His mind is changed to full support of the awakening when revival comes to his church following the preaching of George Whitfield in 1739.
  - 1739/40: The Presbyterian Church could no longer be held together.
    - Formally split until 1758.
  - 1742: Dickinson writes *A Display of God's Special Grace*.
    - An account of the Great Awakening in the middle colonies.
  - October 7, 1747: Jonathan Dickinson enters his eternal rest.
    - He was greatly adorned with the gifts and graces of his heavenly Master, in the light thereof he appeared as a star of superior brightness and influence in the orb of the church, which has sustained a great and unspeakable loss in his death. He was of uncommon and very extensive usefulness. He boldly appeared in the defense of the great and important truths of our most holy religion and the gospel doctrines of the free and sovereign grace of God. – Ebenezer Pemperton.<sup>3</sup>
- Leadership Lessons
  - Practical Churchmanship: Lessons from Jonathan Dickinson in the Colonial Era.

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<sup>3</sup> Edwin Francis Hatfield, *History of Elizabeth, New Jersey* (New York, NY: Carlton and Lanahan, 1868), 351.

- The best of New Side Presbyterianism
  - Warm hearted piety – how might this play out in the life of the local church?
    - Dedicate yourself to the life of the Spirit.
    - Galatians 5:24-25, *Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.*
  - Evangelistic fervor – what becomes of a church or denomination that loses it?
    - Devote yourself to the fires of evangelism, understanding the cultural challenges.
    - Romans 1:16, *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*
  - Pastoral Faithfulness – how can a local church benefit from it?
    - Personally commit yourself to Christlike servant-leadership for the sake of the local church.
    - 1 Peter 5:1-3: *<sup>1</sup>Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, <sup>2</sup>shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; <sup>3</sup>nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.*
  - Theological Depth – does it matter what we believe?
    - Resist the temptation of doctrinal minimalism.
    - 2 Timothy 1:13-14, *Retain the standard of sounds words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which*

*are in Christ Jesus. Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you.*

- Caretaker of the Church – how can a church leader or member cultivate such a spirit?
  - Protect the health of the church by cultivating its purity and unity.
    - A good churchman can identify principles versus preferences.
    - Passing the church to the rising generation.
  - 2 Timothy 4:6, *For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.*
    - Only Jonathan Dickinson could pull the warring parties together to sing Psalm 133 in the middle of the fiery debates at Synod. He was the best Presbyterian of his day, but the best of Presbyterianism did not die with him.

**Module Two. Let's Go Forward: A Modest Applied Theology of the Purity and Unity of the Church, Designed for Ongoing Leadership Training**

*Big Idea: If church leaders can focus on their confessional commitments, the nature and mission of the church, and the inerrancy and sufficiency of the Word, it will be a major step forward on the road to joyful purity and the sweetness of unity among the brothers.*

If a boat has left its harbor, it will be unavoidably affected by the seas. The waves will slap the sides and crash the deck. But if the boat has a strong enough anchor it will not drift as it is assaulted by its environment. There are innumerable threats to the church's health today. From critical theory to uncertainty about the creation account, the church is like a boat at sea. It is not plausible for a local church to have an expert counter

to each of the challenges. However, the local church can have a solid enough anchor beyond simple platitudes. How can church be on solid footing in the rising generation?

The first three centuries of American Presbyterianism were forged in the crucible of three important conflicts, each of which either threatened the purity and unity of the church, or strengthened it, depending on one's perspective. Two decades of pastoral ministry and years of historical study and on this important subject have taught me to believe the latter: ours is a church much stronger because men were willing to contend for the faith.

The three conflicts that gave shape to the contemporary PCA, and especially its purity and unity, more than any other were 1) The importance of shared confessional commitments, 2) A proper vision of the nature of the church, 3) Maintaining the doctrine of the scriptures against all tides of culture. These three important doctrines, the Confession, the Church, the Scripture, can be the anchor needed to keep us from being set adrift and more likely produce a purity and unity of the church.

#### Lecture One: Confessional Commitments

- Biblical Rationale for Confessional Commitments: A confession of faith is, simply put, summarizing the words of sacred scripture through the means of ordinary language.
  - There are two main lines of thought connected to the biblical rationale for confessional commitments.
    - The first is the presence of creeds and confessional statements in the scriptures and their relative usefulness to the life of the early church. This project highlights the creedal formula of Ephesians 4

as setting a standard for our own creedal or confessional church.<sup>4</sup>

The Apostle Paul, in thinking about the life of the local church, showed that the community is shaped by its shared union under the confessional statement, “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.” (Eph. 4:4-6). This creedal formula is itself an outworking of our Lord’s prayer in John 17:22 that, “they may be one, just as We are one.” In declaring his creedal commitments, Paul was signaling the usefulness of a body of doctrine to be embraced and deployed in the life of the local church.

- The other line of thought is far more direct, namely, that the scriptures themselves indicate the usefulness of a collective body of doctrine, agreed upon by the church. Paul warned his associate Timothy about the conceit and morbid interests of those who, “advocate a different doctrine,” than that of the apostles (1 Timothy 6:3).

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<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 4 is hardly the only biblical creed. Others include: The Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.” The Christ Hymn of Philippians 2:5-11: “<sup>5</sup>Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup>but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup>Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. <sup>9</sup>For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, <sup>10</sup>so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup>and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” The Trustworthy Statement of 2 Timothy 2:11-13: “<sup>11</sup>It is a trustworthy statement: For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him; <sup>12</sup>If we endure, we will also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us; <sup>13</sup>If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.”

- Sacred scripture itself advocates for a body of doctrine to be agreed upon by the church, which body of doctrine we may call a confession.
- Application: Chad Van Dixhoorn rightly advises the contemporary church that its instinct should be to state biblical truth clearly and publicly.<sup>5</sup> For Paul, faithfulness to the church’s purity and unity is a matter of discipleship.
  - In an anti-theological age, the church can enjoy a kind of unity unique to biblical Christianity when it unites around shared doctrines.
  - These shared doctrines in the form of creeds and confessions are what James Bannerman helpfully calls the “recasting and restating” of Christ’s doctrines.<sup>6</sup>
  - In the Ephesian creedal formula, as in other scriptural creeds, the Apostolic witness helps the church to enjoy its unity by hemming them in as a single body of believers under the creedal truths.
- Theological Rationale for Confessional Commitments: Each generation must combat the encroachment of pernicious theologies. Skewed doctrine has a corrosive effect on the local church and even denominations. But who’s to say which doctrines are sound and which are skewed?

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<sup>5</sup> Chad B. Van Dixhoorn, ed., *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms: A Reader’s Edition* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 7.

<sup>6</sup> James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church*, vol. 1, (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2009), 292.

- The value of confessionalism: it provides an agreed upon body of doctrine that can set boundaries around acceptable theological ideas.
  - Some may conflate being “a confessional church” with simply reciting creeds and confessions in public worship. That is good practice, but more is needed.
    - A growing trend may be discernable within the Presbyterian Church in America that devalues confessional commitments under the idea that the Westminster Standards are decreasingly useful in the spiritual formation of our people.
      - It is doubtful that this is an intentional departure from reformation era convictions.
      - Rather, it is more likely a slow drift that results from a lack of confessional fervor.
  - For confessionalism to be an effective means for spiritual formation, the Standards of the PCA should be regularly studied and embraced, while also serving as an arbiter in theological disputes.
    - Confessionalism has the ability to meet the challenges of pernicious theologies by redoubling the church’s voice in the ancient paths.
      - This is not to suggest that unqualified subscription provides a more likely path toward doctrinal purity

or ecclesiastical unity. After recounting the history of subscription in Scotland, for instance, Ligon Duncan states, “It is evident from the Scottish practice, that subscription is not the answer if one is seeking to create theological unity out of diversity. Rather, it is an instrument of enforcement and preservation of existing orthodoxy and consensus. Any who see ‘strict subscription’ as a panacea for the conservative Presbyterian Churches in America, hence, have the cart before the horse. First there must exist a consensus to guard, before one discusses how best to guard it.”<sup>7</sup>

- This touches on the most important lesson from the historical disputes over confessionalism in the Presbyterian Church of the colonial period:
  - Whether a person wishes for a stricter subscription in the PCA or is satisfied with the current practice of good-faith, true confessionalism depends on the honesty of the men who adhere and the conviction of church courts to utilize the Standards.

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<sup>7</sup> J. Ligon Duncan, “Owning the Confession: Subscription in the Scottish Presbyterian Tradition,” in David W. Hall, *The Practice of Confessional Subscription* (Oak Ridge, TN: Covenant Foundation, 2001), 87.

- Leaders in the PCA need to be called to faithfulness, even truthfulness, in their own confessional commitments.
- Historical Rationale for Confessional Commitments: The Presbyterian Church in America has not always been of one mind on the importance or lawfulness of subordinate standards. There was serious opposition in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, just as the church was finding its footing in the colonies.
  - Lesson for Church Leaders: The church learned, largely under Jonathan Dickinson’s pastoral approach to the Hemphill affair, that confessional commitments are a necessary tool for maintaining the purity of the church, which in turn gives greater possibility to meaningful unity.
    - The Hemphill affair taught the church that Confessionalism cannot be merely a box to check on the way to ordination.

#### Lecture Two: The Nature and Mission of the Church

- Biblical Rationale for the Spiritual Mission of the Church: The Great Commission sets the nature and mission of the church, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20)

- The church is a spiritual body in nature, formed by the Word of Christ who, through Paul, called it, “The pillar and support of the truth.” (1 Timothy 3:15).
  - The primary mission of the church, it must be maintained, is also spiritual in nature, and not political or earthly.
- Theological Rationale for the Spiritual Mission of the Church: The Westminster Confession of Faith states that that God alone is the Lord of the conscience, which in turn means that the church, having received the keys of the Kingdom, can bind only as God binds because the church’s authority is moral and spiritual in nature.<sup>8</sup>
  - As the church has no authority over things concerning the civil powers, so the civil powers have no authority over the things concerning the church.
    - This is why chapters 20 and 23 were the stated scruples unanimously taken in the afternoon session of the Adopting Act. That sentiment was carried forward in the 1788 adoption of the Standards of the Presbyterian church.
    - This becomes significant for the church’s mission insofar as the church is tasked with carrying out the Great Commission, which is, of course, a spiritual exercise.
  - For the church to prioritize its ministries around the affairs of the world would represent a serious departure from the mission given by Christ.
    - The Presbyterian church has not agreed on whether or not it has a voice on important civil matters like prison reform, economic

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<sup>8</sup> Alan D. Strange, *The Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church in the Ecclesiology of Charles Hodge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), 36.

equity or the homeless pandemic. Those are all very good societal concerns that Christians should engage, but they should not become the foci of the church proper if they diminish the mission of the church consistent with the Great Commission.

- Historical Rationale for the Spiritual Mission of the Church: When the Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States, later the PCUS, was founded in 1861 it declared itself committed to the Spirituality of the Church by envisioning the church and the state as separate planets in separate orbits, “and unless each is confined to its own track, the consequences may be disastrous.”<sup>9</sup>
  - Historically, when the church has lessened its commitments to the spiritual mission of the church making disciples and building them to maturity in the faith, the results have, as predicted in 1861, been disastrous.
    - That is not to suggest that the church must remain silent on all civil affairs.
      - The PCUS erred significantly in its silence over the immorality of chattel slavery.
      - True again of its silence in the Civil Rights era of the 1960s.
    - Insofar as the PCA represents the continuing witness of the PCUS, the denomination has repented for its generational sin.
      - However, the church cannot respond by committing itself to a mission of societal change or human flourishing.

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<sup>9</sup> *Minutes of the Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States*, vol. 1 (Augusta, GA: Steam Power Press Chronicle and Sentinel, 1861), 52-53.

- Rather, the PCA should remember the trend that has always led to theological liberalism, namely, when the mission of the church is set aside, so is its orthodoxy.

### Lecture Three: Contending for the Doctrine of Scripture

- Biblical Rationale for the Inerrancy and Sufficiency of the Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:16 declares, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” It is a self-declaration of the authority, inerrancy, infallibility, and sufficiency of the bible.
  - The Christian faith is by its very nature a revealed religion, as opposed to a natural one. God is the Author and the Source of all knowledge, and His Word reveals all that is necessary for life and godliness.
    - The bible declares, “Thus sayeth the Lord,” almost four thousand times.
      - The bible leaves no room for the wisdom of man to be considered its equal.
    - 2 Peter 1:21 can establish our confidence in the divine origin of the text, for “men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” The doctrines of the bible were not the inventions of men, but from the mind of God.
      - The bible, therefore, is our supreme authority, demanding all secondary authorities be in subjection to it.
- Theological Rationale for the Inerrancy and Sufficiency of the Scripture: Our doctrine of the Word may be summarized as our belief in the infallibility and

inerrancy of the Word of God because we believe its plenary, verbal inspiration and that the bibles' trustworthiness is in its own self-authentication.

- The Westminster Confession of Faith states in 1:5, “We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to a high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man’s salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God.”
- Historical Rationale for the Inerrancy and Sufficiency of the Scripture: It is one thing to support the infallibility and inerrancy of the scriptures but is equally important to support the sufficiency of the scriptures. James Montgomery Boice noted the alarming trend in evangelicalism at the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “Our problem is in deciding whether the Bible is sufficient for the church’s life and work. We confess its authority, but we discount its ability to do what is necessary to draw unbelievers to Christ, enable us to grow in godliness, provide direction for our lives, and transform and revitalize society.”<sup>10</sup>
  - When the church has drifted from its confidence in the inerrancy and sufficiency of the scripture it has inevitably lost its purpose of existence.
  - With the rise of Higher Criticism and its denial of the scripture, the Presbyterian church became subject to deadly errors.

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<sup>10</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Gospel of Grace?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 66.

- This was the problem Machen decried, but the challenge to orthodox Christianity was hardly confined to the North. Southern Presbyterians, almost immediately after the 1870 reunion, became infected with liberal ideas of the Scripture, mostly through Union Theological Seminary, in Virginia.
  - Social engineering under the guise of the church's voice slowly but surely eroded the PCUS until it could no longer be recognized as a viable branch of the church, thus giving rise to the Presbyterian Church in America.
  - The broadening of the church's doctrine of scripture has shown, historically, to be the surest means of losing its way.

### **Conclusion**

How, then, can officers promote the purity and unity of the church in a meaningful way, as they have vowed? The Presbyterian church has struggled with that question since its founding in America. Often, pastors and elders take their vow, then hope for the best. They might even view their fulfillment of that vow from a purely relational perspective: trust the pastor to guard the church's purity, and simply avoid conflict. More is needed; something quantifiable or more concrete. It is my belief that if the three-fold commitment to Confessional standards, the spiritual mission of the church and the sufficiency of the Scripture can be recovered and prioritized, then PCA churches can take a large step toward greater health as they are cultivated by its purity and unity.

There are biblical, theological, and historical reasons to do so. In the end, that represents the hope of this project.

However, there is another hope. The Presbyterian Church in America needs more Jonathan Dickinsons. His contemporaries remembered him as a man who served the church of his generation with both mind and soul.<sup>11</sup> We wish to see men like him serve the rising generations the same way. Through him, under the guidance of providence, the Presbyterian church was formed in America. His steely commitment to the doctrines of grace, his warm piety, and his vision to see himself as a caretaker of the church in his generation produced a kind of Presbyterianism that could be passed to the next. He stood up when the church asked him to. Perhaps the Lord will raise up others to stand with him.

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<sup>11</sup> Bryan F. LeBeau, *Jonathan Dickinson and the Formative Years of American Presbyterianism* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 187.

## APPENDIX A

### TIMELINE OF EVENTS, ASSOCIATIONS, AND PUBLICATIONS OF JONATHAN DICKINSON

April 22, 1688: Born to Hezekiah and Abigail Dickinson, Hatfield, MA.

1702: Enrolls at the School for the Church (later, Yale College)

1706: Graduates from the School for the Church

1708: Moves to Elizabethtown, NJ

1709: Marries Joanna Melyen

September 29, 1709: Ordained as Pastor of the church at Elizabethtown, NJ

1715: Corresponding member of the Presbytery of Philadelphia; participates in ordination service of Robert Orr

September 1716: On the rolls of the Presbytery of Philadelphia

April 29, 1717: On the rolls of the Synod of Philadelphia; participates in ordination service of John Pierson

September 19, 1717: Elizabethtown congregation makes first financial contribution to the Presbyterian cause.

1719-1733: Stated Clerk of the Presbytery of Philadelphia

1719: Ordination service of Joseph Webb at Newark, NJ

1720: Member of Synod's standing commission to handle all affairs referred to it

1721: Moderator of Synod of Philadelphia

1722: Preaches opening service of Synod; defends his 1721 protest resulting in unanimous vote. Synod sings Psalm 133 in celebration

1724: Publishes *Defense of Presbyterian Ordination* in response to Episcopacy in CT and MA

1727: Introduces motion regarding subscription

- 1728: Opposes stricter subscription measures before Synod
- 1729: Adopting Act
- 1732: Publishes *The Reasonableness of Christianity*
- 1733: Publishes *The Scripture Bishop Vindicated or, The Divine Right of Presbyterian Ordination and Government, Against the Exceptions of a Pamphlet Entitled The Scripture Bishop Examined*
- 1733: Presbytery of East Jersey formed; becomes key leader
- 1734: Preaches funeral sermon for Ruth Pierson, wife of John Pierson
- 1735: Anonymously publishes *Remarks on a Letter to a Friend in the Country*; defends commission work in Hemphill case
- 1736: Involved in controversy over Episcopacy and discipline of Col. Josiah Ogden for harvesting wheat on the Sabbath; in response publishes, *The Vanity of Human Institutions in the Worship of God*
- 1737: Participates in the ordination service of Aaron Burr, Sr.
- 1738: Publishes *The Reasonableness of Non-conformity*
- 1738: Presbytery of East Jersey and Long Island form Presbytery of New York
- August 1739: People of Elizabethtown begin to experience spiritual awakening
- 1739: Changes view on the awakening
- 1739: Appointed to the committee of the Synod of Philadelphia to pursue a charter for a college in the middle colonies (College of New Jersey)
- November 1739: George Whitfield preaches at Elizabethtown
- April 1740: Whitfield at Elizabethtown a second time
- 1740: Urges the *Honorable Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge* to send missionaries to Long Island, New Jersey and Pennsylvania
- 1740: First edition of *The Witness of the Spirit* promoting the Awakening while condemning excesses
- June 1740: Awakening comes in full measure to Elizabethtown
- 1741: Publishes *Some True Scripture Doctrines* outlining the doctrines of grace against those who promote the Great Awakening without care for theology

- 1742: Publishes *A Display of God's Special Grace* in support of the awakening
- 1742: Joins with Aaron Burr, Sr. and Ebenezer Pemberton in recruiting David Brainerd to go on the mission field
- 1742: Moderator of Synod of New York
- 1743: Publishes second edition of *The Witness of the Spirit*
- 1743: Synod of Philadelphia met and excluded Dickinson because of *The Witness of the Spirit*
- 1743: Opens Synod with sermon on 1 Corinthians 1:10 to a very divided body; models sermon after Roger Craighead's sermon on the same text before 1720 Synod of Ulster
- 1743: Publishes *The Nature and Necessity of Religion*
- 1745: Publishes *Familiar Letters to a Gentleman on a Variety of Seasonable and Important Subjects of Religion*
- 1745: Joins with the Synod of New York; Moderator of Synod
- 1745-1747: David Brainerd frequent guest at Dickinson home
- April 20, 1745: Joanna Melyen Dickinson dies
- 1746: Publishes *A Second Vindication of God's Sovereign Grace*
- 1746: Preaches opening sermon of Synod on Psalm 24:4
- April 7, 1747: Marries the former Mrs. Mary Crane, widow of Mr. Elihu Crane; service performed by David Brainerd
- 1747: First President of the College of New Jersey
- October 7, 1747: Enters his eternal rest

## APPENDIX B

Full transcript of the minutes of the Synod of Philadelphia, September 19, 1729.

19 day, at nine o'clock, A. M. post preces sederunt qui supra.

Ordered, That the minutes of our last sederunt be read. The Rev. Mr. John Willson coming providentially into these parts, signifying his desire of being admitted as a member of the Synod, his credentials being read, and the Synod satisfied therewith, he was unanimously received. The committee brought in an overture upon the affair of the confession, which, after long debating upon it, was agreed upon in haec verba. Although the Synod do not claim or pretend to any authority of imposing our faith upon other men's consciences, but do profess our just dissatisfaction with, and abhorrence of such impositions, and do utterly disclaim all legislative power and authority in the Church, being willing to receive one another as Christ has received us to the glory of God, and admit to fellowship in sacred ordinances, all such as we have grounds to believe Christ will at last admit to the kingdom of heaven, yet we are undoubtedly obliged to take care that the faith once delivered to the saints be kept pure and uncorrupt among us, and so handed down to our posterity; and do therefore agree that all the ministers of this Synod, or that shall hereafter be admitted into this Synod, shall declare their agreement in, and approbation of, the Confession of Faith, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, as being in all the essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine, and do also adopt the said Confession and Catechisms as the confession of our faith. And we do also agree, that all

the Presbyteries within our bounds shall always take care not to admit any candidate of the ministry into the exercise of the sacred function but what declares his agreement in opinion with all the essential and necessary articles of said Confession, either by subscribing the said Confession of Faith and Catechisms, or by a verbal declaration of their assent thereto, as such minister or candidate shall think best. And in case any minister of this Synod, or any candidate for the ministry, shall have any scruple with respect to any article or articles of said Confession or Catechisms, he shall at the time of his making said declaration declare his sentiments to the Presbytery or Synod, who shall, notwithstanding, admit him to the exercise of the ministry within our bounds, and to ministerial communion, if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge his scruple or mistake to be only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship, or government. But if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge such ministers or candidates erroneous in essential and necessary articles of faith, the Synod or Presbytery shall declare them incapable of communion with them. And the Synod do solemnly agree, that none of us will traduce or use any opprobrious terms of those that differ from us in these extra-essential and not necessary points of doctrine, but treat them with the same friendship, kindness, and brotherly love, as if they had not differed from us in such sentiments. Mr. Morgan sent a letter to the Synod giving his reasons for his absence, which were sustained. Adjourned till three o'clock, P. M.

At three o'clock, P. M. post preccs sedcrunt qui supra.

Ordered, That the minutes of our last sedurunt be read. All the ministers of this Synod now present, except one that declared him self not prepared, viz. Masters Jedidiah Andrews, Thomas Craighead, John Thomson, James Anderson, John Pierson, Samuel

Gelston, Joseph Houston, Gilbert Tennent, Adam Boyd, Jonathan Dickinson, John Bradner, Alexander Hutchinson, Thomas Evans, Hugh Stevenson, William Tennent, Hugh Conn, George Gillespie, and John Willson, after proposing all the scruples that any of them had to make against any articles and expressions in the Confession of Faith and Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, have unanimously agreed in the solution of those scruples, and in declaring the said Confession and Catechisms to be the confession of their faith, excepting only some clauses in the twentieth and twenty- third chapters, concerning which clauses the Synod do unanimously declare, that they do not receive those articles in any such sense as to suppose the civil magistrate hath a controlling power over Synods with respect to the exercise of their ministerial authority; or power to persecute any for their religion, or in any sense contrary to the Protestant succession to the throne of Great Britain. The Synod observing that unanimity, peace, and unity, which appeared in all their consultations and determinations relating to the affair of the Confession, did unanimously agree in giving thanks to God in solemn prayer and praises. A supplication from the congregation of New London, as also another supplication from the congregation of Upper Elk, being read and heard, the consideration of them was delayed till our next.

Ordered, That Masters William Tennent, and Gilbert Tennent, Willson, and Elmer, be a committee to inspect into the business between Mr. Bradner and Samuel Nealy, which was transmitted from the committee to the Synod. Adjourned till nine o'clock, to-morrow morning.

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## VITA

Brian Peterson, son of Don and Louise Peterson, was born and raised in southern California. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from Chico State University in northern California in 1996, with a major in Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and Remote Sensing. In 2003, he received the Master of Divinity degree from Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, MS.

Brian was ordained by the Northern California Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) in 2003 and served as senior minister of Sierra View Presbyterian Church. In 2015, he moved to the Charlotte region, where he served as assistant minister at Christ Covenant Church (PCA) in Matthews, NC. In 2019, he moved to Myrtle Beach, SC where he began serving as senior minister at Surfside Presbyterian Church (PCA).

Brian and his wife, Anna, have been married since 1999. They have seven delightful children, Samuel, Kiah, Kate, TJ, Nathan, Meghan, and Micah. It is their highest joy that their children walk with God. Brian enjoys quality time with his family and friends, a good steak on the grill, the San Diego Padres, and college football.