

John DeWitt: New School Presbyterian at an Old School Seminary

By Joshua Brownfield

INTRODUCTION

The questions, “What do we believe?” and “How do we consistently confess what we believe?” are perennial for any ecclesiastical body. Those inquiries relate not only to confessions and creeds, but also polity. For those Christian denominations that bear the label, “confessional,” creed and polity intersect at the point of subscription.¹ Those ecclesiastical bodies must give careful thought to the standard to which office-bearers must be held accountable, the proper course of action if an office-bearer deviates from that standard, and what portion, if any, of that same standard, can be deemed “optional.” The history of American Presbyterianism is the story of an ecclesiastical tradition that has grappled, sometimes dramatically, with those questions. The controversy concerning the revision of the Westminster Confession of Faith (hereafter WCF) in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (hereafter PCUSA) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries offers a compelling glimpse into the nature of those struggles, and there was perhaps no more intriguing player in that drama than John DeWitt (1842–1923), the sixth professor of church history at Princeton Theological Seminary.²

One might expect a professor of church history at an avowedly Old School seminary to urge his fellow Presbyterians to maintain the integrity of the WCF as well as require strict fidelity in their standards for subscription. However, DeWitt opted for an entirely different approach. Though he initially advised against revision, DeWitt ultimately approved of the alterations to the WCF that arguably precipitated the doctrinal controversies of the 1920s. DeWitt’s actions may seem surprising, given his affiliation with Princeton. However, his New School Presbyterian background, along with his stated understanding of the function of church history, help illuminate his actions. Before discussing his life and

role in the revision controversy, however, some understanding of his context and background are necessary.

ECCLESIASTICAL CONTEXT

John DeWitt lived in consequential days for American Presbyterianism. In the decade prior to DeWitt’s birth, the “tensions within the Presbyterian Church over confessionalism, polity, voluntary societies, revivalism, theology, and slavery were reaching a boiling point.”³ Since Presbyterianism’s founding in 1729, it had been no stranger to conflict, but matters seemed to come to a head in the 1830s as Presbyterianism polarized into the Old and New Schools.⁴ The Old School Presbyterians were concerned over the consequences of the 1801 Plan of Union, believing that the partnership with Congregationalists to plant churches in the American west had watered down Presbyterian polity and doctrine.⁵ Prior to the 1837 General Assembly, the Old School party determined to act. Holding the majority in the assembly that year, the Old School “voted on a measure to abrogate the 1801 Plan of Union,” and “excised four synods of churches formed under the Plan of Union.”⁶ The New School countered that Old School fears about

THE AUTHOR: Joshua Brownfield is a Ph.D. candidate in Church History at Westminster Theological Seminary, PA, and is a member of Cornerstone Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Ambler, PA.

1. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2006), 98.

2. David C. Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary*, vol. 2, *The Majestic Testimony, 1869–1929* (Edinburgh; Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), 134.

3. Bradley J. Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture: A History* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 90.

4. Longfield, 92.

5. D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking a Better Country: 300 Years of American Presbyterianism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2007), 122.

6. Hart and Muether, 125.

heresy were overblown and produced the Auburn Declaration to make their case. Unfortunately for the New School, it proved the Old School concerns, because the Auburn Declaration “allowed moderate New England teachings that would not necessarily contradict the essentials of the Westminster Confession, while it clearly excluded the most objectionable errors alleged by the Old School.”⁷ Attempts at the 1838 General Assembly by the New School to reinstate themselves ended in failure, and a new assembly was born.⁸

Between 1838 and 1869 the Old and New School assemblies existed parallel with one another, but took on different characteristics. Within the New School assembly, internal conflicts as well as a deteriorating partnership with Congregationalists forced it to become more self-consciously Presbyterian.⁹ However, a series of tracts produced with denominational imprimatur in the 1850s revealed the New School desire to modify doctrines such as particular redemption in an attempt to “express the traditionalist Calvinist dogma in moderate terms that allow a practical application.”¹⁰ The increasing prominence of theologian Henry B. Smith’s (somewhat mitigated) mediating theology at Union

Seminary signaled that the New School was “working within a Calvinistic framework but sought to channel their theology in directions that would blend Reformed doctrine with present-day realities. As such, the New School tended to avoid the seemingly harsher teachings of Calvinism, or smooth its rough edges, to the end of participating in the evangelization and reform of the expanding nation.”¹¹ Meanwhile, as the New School worked to nuance their Calvinism, the Old School was gaining “a reputation as arguably the strictest and most doctrinally precise denomination in the United States.”¹²

The American Civil War brought division to the Old School Presbyterians, as southern Presbyterians rapidly seceded over the 1861 General Assembly’s vote to support the United States government.¹³ The New School was not exempt from division either, as it too experienced the secession of the United Synod of the Presbyterian Church over the slavery issue.¹⁴ The reunification of the nation after the Civil War meant that unity was in the air in 1860s America. Though northern and southern churches were still a century away from returning to one another, there were efforts to bring the Old and New School back together in the northern church.¹⁵ Princeton theologian Charles Hodge argued vociferously against any reunion, because of what he perceived to be the New School’s “lax principle of subscription.”¹⁶ Henry Smith objected that the New School “understood subscription to the Westminster Confession to entail adoption ‘of the Reformed or Calvinistic system.’”¹⁷ In the end, it would be Smith and not Hodge who would prevail, and in 1869 the Old and New School assemblies reunited.¹⁸ It was into these ecclesiastical circumstances that DeWitt was born.

BIOGRAPHY

Early Life

John DeWitt was born five years after the Old and New School split, on October 10, 1842 in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.¹⁹ DeWitt’s father William Radcliffe DeWitt, was the pastor of the Market Square Presbyterian Church.²⁰ The elder DeWitt sided enthusiastically with the New School in the Schism of the 1830s, a fact that his son would later recall with pride.²¹ William DeWitt personally saw to his son’s education, and John DeWitt would later attribute his knowledge of Greek and Latin to his father’s daily instruction.²² John attended Harrisburg Academy to prepare for college, but it seems the “private instruction from both his mother and his father” was substantial enough for him to enter Princeton College in 1858 at age sixteen.²³ Unlike his contemporary

7. George M. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth-Century America*, Yale Publications in American Studies 20 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 84.

8. Hart and Muether, 125–26.

9. Hart and Muether, 133, 135.

10. Marsden, 139; Hart and Muether, 135–36.

11. Hart and Muether, 137.

12. Hart and Muether, 143.

13. Longfield, 107; Hart and Muether, 150.

14. Hart and Muether, 153.

15. Longfield, 114.

16. Charles Hodge, “Presbyterian Reunion,” *The Biblical Repository and Princeton Review* 40, no. 1 (1868): 54, accessed May 13, 2014, <http://journals.ptsem.edu>.

17. As quoted in Longfield, 114.

18. Longfield, 114.

19. Frederick W. Loetscher, “John DeWitt,” *The Princeton Theological Review* 22, no. 2 (1924): 181, accessed March 6, 2014, <http://journals.ptsem.edu>.

20. Loetscher, 179.

21. Loetscher, 179; Longfield, 91; John DeWitt, *A Speech, in Support of the Motion to Dismiss the Subject of Confessional Revision, Made at Philadelphia in the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, May Twenty-Fourth Nineteen Hundred and One, by the Rev. John DeWitt, a Commissioner of the New Brunswick Presbytery* (Princeton, NJ: The University Press, 1901), 9.

22. Princeton Theological Seminary, “General Catalogue of Princeton Seminary,” 1881, 1, The John DeWitt Manuscript Collection. Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Library.

23. Frederick W. Loetscher, “John DeWitt, D.D., LL.D.,” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 17, no. 3 (1923): 14; Loetscher, “John DeWitt,” 181.

B. B. Warfield, John DeWitt did not find an aptitude for the sciences, but instead took a more “literary” path.²⁴ DeWitt was graduated in 1861, and returned to Pennsylvania to pursue a career in law.²⁵

Princeton Seminary and Union Seminary

Though he read law for eight months in Harrisburg, DeWitt’s initial choice for vocation would not be a permanent one. At some point his thoughts turned to theological studies.²⁶ His successor at Princeton Seminary, Frederick Loetscher, indicated that the reasons for DeWitt’s sudden change of vocation were not entirely clear, but, given the fact that it was timed with his profession of faith it seems to have been the result of a religious change.²⁷ He returned to New Jersey to attend Princeton Theological Seminary in 1862 and entered his course of study quite late in the year, March 10.²⁸ DeWitt was very interested in his courses in church history with James C. Moffat, and systematic theology with the embodiment of Princeton itself, Charles Hodge.²⁹ He was graduated in 1864 and licensed to preach by the Old School Presbytery of New York.³⁰ He also determined to study for another year at Union Seminary in New York because he started late at Princeton and was ill during his final term.³¹

Henry B. Smith

DeWitt’s year at Union would prove to be quite influential, largely due to two of his professors, Henry Boynton Smith and William Greenough Thayer Shedd.³² DeWitt later referred to these two “as his ‘revered’ teachers.”³³ Smith himself was already a prominent theologian in the New School Presbyterian church, an unsurprising fact given his background and education.³⁴ Smith studied in Germany and was exposed to the “mediating theology,” which “sought to mediate between traditional Christian affirmations on the one hand and philosophy and the spirit of scientific inquiry on the other, by combining a supernatural, emphatically biblical faith with the notion of an inner principle [the incarnation] expressing itself in organic historical development.”³⁵

Smith was particularly influenced by the historian Augustus Neander, whom Smith referred to as “a venerable and beloved teacher” and “the most eminent church historian of our day.”³⁶ Neander was a major figure in German mediating theology, but he was thought to be somewhat vague in his own doctrinal commitments. Mercersburg historian Philip Schaff claimed that Neander could not, for reasons that were not entirely clear, sign the Augsburg Confession in good faith.³⁷ He was,

however, an individual of great “piety,” and clearly won the admiration of his student Henry Smith.³⁸

William G. T. Shedd

The other professor to whom DeWitt expressed his own intellectual debt was William Greenough Thayer Shedd, whose presence at Union Seminary was nothing short of an enigma, given the fact that he was an Old School Presbyterian and was thought to be much more “hard-line” theologically than Henry B. Smith.³⁹ Shedd did not study in Europe, but did train under Joseph Torrey, translator of some of Neander’s works into English.⁴⁰ DeWitt would later write of Shedd that he found through Neander’s works a firm commitment to the reformed faith, because it “had shown its vitality by its persistence.” Shedd, however, seems to have been a more critical admirer of the German historian than DeWitt believed.⁴¹ Shedd wrote,

The historian [Neander] does not exhibit with sufficient fullness, the influence which the inspired canon

24. Ethelbert D. Warfield, “Biographical Sketch of Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield,” in *Revelation and Inspiration*, by Benjamin B. Warfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1927), vi; Loetscher, “John DeWitt,” 182.

25. Loetscher, “John DeWitt, D.D., LL.D.,” 14; Loetscher, “John DeWitt,” 182.

26. Loetscher, “John DeWitt,” 182.

27. Loetscher, 183.

28. Loetscher, 183.

29. Loetscher, 183.

30. Princeton Theological Seminary, “General Catalogue of Princeton Seminary,” 1.

31. Loetscher, “John DeWitt,” 185.

32. James H. Moorhead, *Princeton Seminary in American Religion and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2012), 298.

33. As quoted in Loetscher, “John DeWitt,” 186.

34. Longfield, 111.

35. William K. B. Stoever, “Henry Boynton Smith and the German Theology of History,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 24, no. 1 (September 1, 1968): 72, accessed March 24, 2014. <http://ebscohost.com>.

36. Henry Boynton Smith, “Nature and Worth of the Science of Church History,” in *Faith and Philosophy: Discourses and Essays*, ed. George Lewis Prentiss (New York: Scribner, Armstrong & Company, 1877), 70, accessed March 24, 2014, <http://archive.org/details/faithphilosophydoosmit>.

37. Philip Schaff, *Saint Augustin, Melancthon, Neander: Three Biographies* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1886), 153.

38. Schaff, 153.

39. Moorhead, 299; Elizabeth A. Clark, *Founding the Fathers: Early Church History and Protestant Professors in Nineteenth-Century America*, Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 41.

40. John DeWitt, “William Greenough Thayer Shedd,” *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 6, no. 22 (1895): 300.

41. DeWitt, 302.

has exerted upon the unfolding of the christian life. The process of Sacred History is regarded, too much, as self-directed. Hence, the general undervaluation of strict dogmatic statements, as cramping the movement of the free christian spirit, the leniency towards certain heretical tendencies, and the occasional hesitating tone as well as vagueness of vision in respect to scientific orthodoxy, which characterize the best complete history of the christian religion and church that has yet been written.⁴²

42. William Greenough Thayer Shedd, *Lectures upon the Philosophy of History* (Andover, MA: W. F. Draper, 1857), 126, accessed May 16, 2014, <http://archive.org/details/lecturesuponphiloshed>. Spelling and punctuation are retained from the original.

43. Loetscher, "John DeWitt," 193.

44. Loetscher, 230.

45. Princeton Theological Seminary, "General Catalogue of Princeton Seminary," 1.

46. Loetscher, "John DeWitt," 187. He seems to have had a pleasant experience in his first pastorate, remarking at the time, "My leading encouragements have been my own increased interest in the study of the Gospel; the good attendance of my people upon the ordinances of the House of God, and their diligent attention to the word preached. I think the ministerial life proves as favorable to heart culture as I expected." George L. Shearer and Selden J. Coffin, eds., *A History of the Class That Graduated at Princeton Theological Seminary, in the Year 1864: With an Account of the Triennial Re-Union of the Class, and Biographical Sketches of Its Eighty Members* (Easton, PA: Wood & Bunstein, 1868), 27, accessed April 1, 2014, <http://archive.org/details/historyofclassthooprin>.

47. Loetscher, 188.

48. Allen C. Guelzo, "The First Three 'B's,'" in *Tenth Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia: 175 Years of Thinking and Acting Biblically*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing Company, 2004), 66.

49. Calhoun, 134.

50. Loetscher, "John DeWitt," 199. Though these biographical sermons were quite popular, none of the manuscripts survived. Loetscher, 201n18.

51. Loetscher, 203.

52. Calhoun, 134; Lefferts Augustine Loetscher, *The Broadening Church: A Study of Theological Issues in the Presbyterian Church since 1869* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954), 15; Loetscher, "John DeWitt," 203.

53. Loetscher, "John DeWitt," 207.

54. Loetscher, 211; Calhoun, 134. He had been reticent to move from McCormick, but the death of his wife apparently caused him to reconsider. Loetscher, "John DeWitt," 211.

55. Calhoun, 280.

56. Clark, 12. Samuel Miller, Princeton's first professor of church history, was nearly self-taught in church history. James W. Alexander and Alexander McGill were more or less pastors who had been pressed into teaching the subject. John DeWitt, "The Memorial Tablet to Dr. James C. Moffat," *The Princeton Theological Review* 1, no. 4 (1903): 627, accessed February 28, 2014, <http://journals.ptsem.edu>. Joseph Addison Alexander's specialty was exegesis. Moorhead, 110. James C. Moffat, DeWitt's immediate predecessor, had previously taught Latin and Greek for Princeton College. DeWitt, 628.

In terms of visible influence, William Shedd's impact on DeWitt would shortly manifest itself in his pulpit rhetoric.⁴³ Though DeWitt was more explicit about his appreciation for Shedd, the influence of Smith on his historical methods would later find expression as well.⁴⁴

Pastoral Career

John DeWitt was ordained by the Third Presbytery (New School) of New York on June 9, 1865.⁴⁵ The same month DeWitt was called to pastor the Presbyterian Church (New School) of Irvington, New York.⁴⁶ It would not be a particularly long pastorate, however, as he was called to Central Congregational Church, in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1869.⁴⁷ He then moved to the very Old School Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, in 1876.⁴⁸ The new pastor established a reputation for eloquent preaching, but also for his "popular Sunday afternoon lectures in church history."⁴⁹

Having cultivated for years his natural fondness for historical reading, he now sought to give to his congregation the benefits of his broad and intensive studies in this field. He therefore made it his practice to deliver, at his Sunday afternoon service during successive winters, brief series of sermons on some of the outstanding personalities and movements in the history of the Church.⁵⁰

Lane and McCormick

His time at Tenth was not long, however. He left in 1882 to join the faculty of the Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio.⁵¹ DeWitt's teaching career would take on the same ecclesiastical eclecticism as his pastoral years. He first became Professor of Biblical and Ecclesiastical History at Lane Theological Seminary, a New School seminary that had been founded in 1829.⁵² In 1888 DeWitt was invited to become chair of Apologetics and Missions at the Old School-affiliated McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, Illinois.⁵³ McCormick was an interesting choice, but DeWitt's subsequent career move was perhaps the most surprising of all.

Princeton

In 1892 John DeWitt became the sixth Chair of Church History at Princeton Theological Seminary.⁵⁴ Here he would teach for the next two decades.⁵⁵ Like his predecessors, DeWitt was not a specialist.⁵⁶ Clarence Macartney would later recall that DeWitt was not in possession of what he termed the "technical research" he believed

was consistent with teaching ecclesiastical history.⁵⁷ Loetscher would also write that DeWitt did not have “the knowledge of a scientific and thoroughgoing specialist in his field.”⁵⁸ He lacked facility in French or German for research, and was not given to “the exploration of sources, even in good translations, nor for the laborious making of notes and excerpts from acknowledged authorities.”⁵⁹ What he did possess, Loetscher argued, was “the knowledge of an assiduous, independent, and thoughtful reader who kept his eye well on the salient features of a story, on the main bearings of a discussion, on the underlying principles of a scheme of thought, on the outstanding achievements of a great leader, on the abiding historical values of a given epoch, but who cared little for the minute details of an elaborately documented learning.”⁶⁰

DeWitt taught church history at Princeton for twenty years. DeWitt’s lectures and general classroom presence made an impression on those who heard them. He distributed the titles of the lectures for church history to the students on large sheets of paper so they could post them in their quarters and study the headings frequently. He recommended the purchase of a good general work of church history, Neander among them, and required the presentation of two monographs for the course.⁶¹ He also offered electives that were conducted like seminars that met in his home.⁶² DeWitt retired from teaching in May 1912 and died in 1923.⁶³ His legacy has proven difficult to assess in part because he burned his lectures and his attempt at an autobiography.⁶⁴ However, the event that stands out in a long academic and pastoral career is the role DeWitt played in the revision of the Westminster standards.

DEWITT AND CONFESSONAL REVISION *Background*

The end of the nineteenth-century was a complex time for most American denominations, and that was certainly the case for the PCUSA. Increasing social and economic changes in America post-Civil War presented challenges to Christian groups that had not been encountered heretofore. There was a growing concern over the number of Catholic immigrants coming into the country, as well as the social ills that accompany rapid urbanization.⁶⁵ The nation that the PCUSA existed to serve was changing rapidly, and there was a growing perception that the church (and its confession) needed to change with it.⁶⁶ Lefferts Loetscher, the son of DeWitt’s successor Frederick, located the beginnings of WCF revision movement after the 1869 reunion.⁶⁷ Other reformed communions in other nations were

revising their confessions, and so it was thought the PCUSA should join them.⁶⁸

Re-writing the doctrinal standards for the church seemed plausible, because the gravity of the social challenges seemed to require a greater ecumenism. With that came a reduced emphasis on doctrinal and confessional identity.⁶⁹ Hart and Muether have written of this period as one in which “these concerns moved Presbyterians to conceive of the work of the church more as social than as spiritual. It was the New School’s idea of the church prevailing over the Old School’s. Public morality and civic righteousness pushed aside Word and sacrament. Practical results rather than doctrinal standards became the measurement of churches.”⁷⁰ In an atmosphere in which doctrine was increasingly seen as an obstacle to the church’s mission, it is unsurprising that there was a “growing consensus in the church...to soften the harder Calvinistic edge of the confession.”⁷¹ Beginning in 1887 articles began to appear in the *New York Evangelist* on the question, and the 1888 General Assembly received an overture from the Presbytery of Nassau, Long Island, on the matter.⁷² The groundswell for confessional revision had begun, and John DeWitt, as a professor at McCormick and then Princeton, was called upon to offer his counsel.

57. Clarence E. Macartney, *The Making of a Minister: The Autobiography of Clarence E. Macartney*, ed. J. Clyde Henry (Great Neck, NY: Channel Press, Inc., 1961), 124.

58. Loetscher, “John DeWitt,” 217.

59. Loetscher, 216. Loetscher’s comment seems to ring true on the whole, but some of DeWitt’s articles give evidence of extensive research of a kind, e.g. his 1897 article “The Planting of Princeton College” gives some indication that DeWitt was researching the correspondence of early Princeton figures. John DeWitt, “The Planting of Princeton College,” *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 8, no. 30 (1897): 194, accessed February 28, 2014, <http://journals.ptsem.edu>. He also gives an extensive description of the physical dimensions of the first building at the College of New Jersey. DeWitt, “Princeton College Administrations in the Eighteenth Century,” 396.

60. Loetscher, 217.

61. John DeWitt, “Princeton Theological Seminary. Course in Church History,” n.d., 1, The John DeWitt Manuscript Collection. Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Library.

62. Loetscher, “John DeWitt,” 220.

63. Calhoun, 280; Loetscher, “John DeWitt,” 234.

64. Loetscher, “John DeWitt,” 233.

65. Hart and Muether, 170, 172.

66. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church*, 40.

67. Loetscher, 41.

68. Loetscher, 41.

69. Hart and Muether, 173.

70. Hart and Muether, 173.

71. Hart and Muether, 183.

72. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church*, 41.

Revision in 1890s

DeWitt's engagement in the early stages of the controversy was primarily in print. In 1889 *The Presbyterian Review* published his article, "Revision of the Confession of Faith." DeWitt's conclusion was that, though he was unaware of any specific proposals for changes, he was not in favor of revising the WCF.⁷³ His line of reasoning, however, was somewhat uncharacteristic for what one might expect from a professor at an Old School seminary (then McCormick).⁷⁴

DeWitt attempted to walk a fine line between his desire to retain (in the main) the integrity of the WCF, while also leaving intact the freedom that ordained ministers had to claim exceptions. Picking up concepts from William G. T. Shedd, DeWitt placed himself firmly in favor of retaining the WCF because of what he termed its "antiquity and its survival."⁷⁵ However, he also cited Henry B. Smith, who stated that Scripture, not the WCF, is the "rule of faith and life" for Presbyterians, and that what ministers subscribe to in the Westminster standards is the system that stands behind it, not "every statement in the confession."⁷⁶ DeWitt was quite concerned about the possibility of *ipsissima verba* subscription, and did not wish to see it come to the PCUSA.⁷⁷

73. John DeWitt, "Revision of the Confession of Faith," *The Presbyterian Review* 10, no. 40 (1889): 553, 566. DeWitt mentioned some of the issues that were being discussed at the time, including the status of those who die in infancy as elect or not, the nature of the decrees, the love of God, and the extent of the atonement as being the matters up for debate. DeWitt, 567, 571, 587. But, he was also quick to point out that he could not see "the evidence of any movement, certainly any movement entitled to be called considerable" in favor of revision. DeWitt, "Revision of the Confession of Faith," 556.

74. DeWitt was still teaching apologetics and missions at McCormick in Chicago.

75. DeWitt, "Revision of the Confession of Faith," 558; DeWitt, "William Greenough Thayer Shedd," 302; William Greenough Thayer Shedd, "The Nature, and Influence, of the Historic Spirit," in *Theological Essays* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong & Company, 1877), 76.

76. DeWitt, "Revision of the Confession of Faith," 565.

77. DeWitt, 574.

78. DeWitt, 587–88.

79. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church*, 43.

80. John DeWitt et al., *Ought the Confession of Faith to Be Revised?* (New York: Anson D.F. Randolph & Company, 1890), 5–6, accessed February 28, 2014, http://archive.org/details/oughtconfession000dewi_o.

81. DeWitt et al., 10–12. Van Dyke wished the WCF to be revised to either indicate that all who die in infancy are elect, or to repudiate "a doctrine which no Presbyterian minister holds, or would dare to preach if he did," if it was found to be the other. DeWitt et al., 12.

82. DeWitt et al., 16–17.

83. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church*, 47.

84. Loetscher, 86; DeWitt, *A Speech, in Support of the Motion to Dismiss*, 2.

Interestingly (in light of his subsequent actions) he gave several large quotations from B. B. Warfield, William G. T. Shedd, and R. M. Patterson arguing against what he described as "the proposal to amend the Confession so that it shall assert, more explicitly than it now does, the love of God to all men, the universal sufficiency and adaptation of the atonement, and the universal invitation; as though it were defective at these points."⁷⁸

The 1890 book *Ought the Confession of Faith to Be Revised?* was the next round of published engagement in which DeWitt participated on the revision question. This work was composed of contributions from four authors: William G. T. Shedd; B. B. Warfield; Henry Van Dyke, who was one of the primary campaigners for confessional revision; and DeWitt.⁷⁹ Most of their chapters were letters sent to the *New York Evangelist* in response to the others.⁸⁰ Answering DeWitt's opening salvo in which he called upon revision advocates to make specific proposals, Henry Van Dyke responded by stating three concerns: that Chapter III of the WCF had a "supralapsarian bias [emphasis his]" that needed to be removed, that the confession was lacking an "explicit declaration of the infinite love of God, revealed in the fullness of the Gospel salvation as sufficient for, adapted to, and freely offered to all men," and that the fate of those who die in infancy as described in Chapter X needed to be more explicit.⁸¹ DeWitt's response to Van Dyke was not that he disagreed with the proposed changes *per se*, but that they would make the PCUSA's doctrinal standards "less liberal" than they were hither thereto.⁸² In contrast with his previous article, "Revision of the Confession of Faith," DeWitt did not make a case against the revision, but argued that the broad subscription policy be maintained.

Revision in 1900s

For all the talk of a groundswell of support, the confessional revision movement of the 1890s did not initially effect any change. The number of presbyteries needed to approve the proposed amendments did not meet the necessary two-thirds majority.⁸³ The issue would not go away, however, and it reemerged at the 1901 General Assembly. DeWitt had been on record as stating that he was not in favor of this round of revision because of the threats to Presbyterian unity, and gave a speech in support of a motion to dismiss the revision proposal.⁸⁴ The content of the speech is illuminating. In a manner unlike his Princeton colleagues B. B. Warfield or Geerhardus Vos, who seemed to have understood confessional revision as a kind of compromise with current trends, DeWitt argued against revision by appealing to

the subscription formula used in the New School Presbyterian church.⁸⁵ He concluded his remarks by stating “I do not accept the *ipsissima verba* of the Confession. There are statements in that document with which I disagree.”⁸⁶ He went further to say that he believed that he held to the “system of doctrine of which [it] is an expression.”⁸⁷ DeWitt’s speech failed to stem the tide, and the motion to dismiss was defeated.⁸⁸

Despite his public opposition, DeWitt was called upon to serve on the twenty-one member revision committee. The committee was convened to write a “... brief statement of the Reformed Faith, expressed as far as possible in untechnical terms,” to revise, either through change in wording or by a “Declaratory Statement,” Chapters III, X.3, XVI.7, XXII.3, XXV.6 of the WCF, and to write “statements concerning the love of God for all men, Missions and the Holy Spirit.”⁸⁹ At the 1902 General Assembly, the committee presented its report.⁹⁰ Among other things the proposed changes included language that stated that eternal punishment is held in harmony with the fact that God “has provided in Christ a salvation sufficient for all, adapted to all and freely offered in the Gospel to all;” and that “...no man is condemned except on the ground of his sin.”⁹¹ New chapters were also added on the Holy Spirit and the love of God, the latter of which stated that salvation is “sufficient for and adapted to the whole race of man.”⁹² DeWitt signed the committee’s report that was entered into the record, but it came with an amendment that he disagreed with the changes to Chapter XVI about the works of the unregenerate, the notion that all infants who die go to heaven, and Article X of the untechnical statement, second sentence.⁹³ The emendations to the WCF were approved at the 1903 General Assembly.⁹⁴

Revision Consequences

Time would tell what the impact of the confessional revision would be. In the immediate aftermath it was thought that the changes had allowed the church to maintain a kind of “basic theological conservatism.”⁹⁵ Even Warfield seemed to think that the changes were not substantial.⁹⁶ However, the declaratory statements that characterized the atonement in nearly Arminian terms generated discussion in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church about a reunion.⁹⁷ This reunion would eventually occur, and signaled further ecumenical efforts to come, including PCUSA involvement in the Federal Council of Churches.⁹⁸ In Hart and Muether’s reading of Presbyterian history, the confessional revision altered the nature of doctrinal conflicts to come, because it would become necessary for conservative Presbyterians

to resort to defining what would be “necessary and essential.”⁹⁹ “By doing so, they sought to italicize certain doctrines as the Bible’s truly nonnegotiables, rather than the Standards themselves, as containing the system of doctrine found in the Scriptures.”¹⁰⁰

Understanding DeWitt’s Opposition

None of this would have been known to DeWitt at the time. There has been some questioning in the secondary literature as to why DeWitt, a professor at an unashamedly Old School seminary, would speak out against revision in the 1880s and 1890s, then serve on the committee for revision in 1901 and 1902. James Moorhead seems to

85. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church*, 86; Hart and Muether, 183; DeWitt, *A Speech, in Support of the Motion to Dismiss*, 11. Curiously, DeWitt’s mentor Shedd used similar logic a decade earlier. DeWitt, et al., *Ought the Confession of Faith to be Revised?*, 85.

86. DeWitt, *A Speech, in Support of the Motion to Dismiss*, 15.

87. DeWitt, 16. DeWitt was apparently unaware that his remarks were being recorded. Rev. Charles A. Dickey had a stenographer copy down DeWitt’s remarks, and they were subsequently sent to DeWitt so he could edit and revise them for publication. *Ibid.*, 1.

88. DeWitt, 2.

89. William Henry Roberts, ed., *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America: Proceedings, Etc., of the 114th General Assembly* (Philadelphia: Office of the General Assembly, 1902), 87.

90. The report included a “brief statement of the Reformed Faith, expressed as far as possible in untechnical terms,” in addition to a number of proposed changes to the Westminster standards. Roberts, 87. In addition to changes with regard to eternal punishment, Chapter X was altered so as to indicate that all children who die in infancy are elect. To Chapter XVI, Section 7, language was changed to indicate that works of the unregenerate are “in themselves praiseworthy and useful.” Roberts, 89.

91. Roberts, 89.

92. Roberts, 91.

93. Roberts, 97. The sentence in the brief statement that DeWitt objected to was as follows: “We believe that He has spoken by holy men of God in making known His truth to men for their salvation; that, through our exalted Saviour, He was sent forth in power to convict the world of sin, to enlighten men’s minds in the knowledge of Christ, and to persuade and enable them to obey the call of the Gospel; and that He abides with the Church, dwelling in every believer as the spirit of truth, of holiness, and of comfort.” Roberts, 95.

94. Hart and Muether, 184.

95. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church*, 89.

96. Benjamin B. Warfield, “The Confession of Faith as Revised in 1903,” in *Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. John E. Meeter, vol. 2 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing Company, 2001), 396.

97. Warfield, 406. “The Cumberland Church had at its birth rejected the doctrines of double predestination and limited atonement, and several Cumberland leaders interpreted the recent confessional revision of the Presbyterian Church as bringing the two churches into essential doctrinal accord.” Longfield, 139.

98. Hart and Muether, 184–85.

99. Hart and Muether, 186.

100. Hart and Muether, 186.

see DeWitt's actions as a change in stance on the question of revision from 1890 to 1902.¹⁰¹ It is somewhat ambiguous as to why DeWitt initially argued against the insertion of God's love and the extent of the atonement in 1889 and then signed his name to them in 1902. However, it is arguably the case that DeWitt would not have been ultimately concerned about the integrity of the WCF given his confidence in a broad subscription policy. Though the full nature of the reasons for his actions remains inscrutable, some illumination in understanding his actions can be found, arguably, in his New School sympathies and his understanding of the function of church history.

New School Affinities

DeWitt was a very loyal New School Presbyterian, and given the New School's attitude toward doctrinal particulars, his actions are somewhat unsurprising.

101. Moorhead, 299.

102. John DeWitt, *The First General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1887), 17. See also John DeWitt, "Princeton College Administrations in the Nineteenth Century," *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 8, no. 32 (1897): 636, accessed February 28, 2014, <http://journals.ptsem.edu>; John DeWitt, "Princeton College Administrations in the Eighteenth Century," *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 8, no. 31 (1897): 401, accessed February 28, 2014, <http://journals.ptsem.edu>; John DeWitt, "The Testimony of the Holy Spirit to the Bible," *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 6, no. 21 (1895): 79, accessed February 28, 2014, <http://journals.ptsem.edu>.

103. John DeWitt, "The Place of the Westminster Assembly in Modern History," *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 9, no. 35 (1898): 381, accessed February 28, 2014, <http://journals.ptsem.edu>.

104. DeWitt, 382.

105. DeWitt, 381.

106. See Frederick W. Loetscher's comments above.

107. His essay on Jonathan Edwards was delivered to the Berkshire Conferences of Congregation Churches to commemorate Edwards's birth. *Ibid.*, 189; John DeWitt, "Jonathan Edwards: A Study," *The Princeton Theological Review* 2, no. 5 (1904): 89, accessed February 28, 2014, <http://journals.ptsem.edu>. His articles on John Calvin and Philip Melancthon were given on dates corresponding to the anniversaries of their births. John DeWitt, "John Calvin—The Man," *The Princeton Theological Review* 7, no. 3 (1909): 369, accessed February 28, 2014, <http://journals.ptsem.edu>; John DeWitt, "Philip Melancthon, Scholar and Reformer," *The Presbyterian Quarterly* 11, no. 41 (July 1897): 273. The essays on Samuel Miller and Archibald Alexander were delivered at Princeton Seminary (at opening ceremonies for the academic year in the case of the former) and intended to be edificatory for his hearers. John DeWitt, "Archibald Alexander's Preparation for His Professorship," *The Princeton Theological Review* 3, no. 4 (1905): 573, 575; accessed February 28, 2014, <http://journals.ptsem.edu>; John DeWitt, "The Intellectual Life of Samuel Miller," *The Princeton Theological Review* 4, no. 2 (1906): 168, accessed February 28, 2014, <http://journals.ptsem.edu>.

Even apart from his writings on the revision controversy, DeWitt's works exhibit a New School slant. He reveals a considerable degree of sympathy for revivals and revivalism. For example, in his 1887 address *The First General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* he argued that the Evangelical Revival was a "greater religious revolution" than the Reformation, and that it was the means by which Deism was refuted.¹⁰²

DeWitt's perspective on the value of the WCF is also both indicative of a New School outlook and is highly intriguing given its timing. In "The Place of the Westminster Assembly in Modern History," written in 1898 (and thus in the midst of the controversy), he asks the question as to whether Presbyterian "theology and polity have not, by this time, exhausted themselves as great and beneficent forces; and whether, standing at the beginning of a new era, we would not better revise them out of our intellectual beliefs, and contemplate them only with historical interest."¹⁰³ He answered in the negative, but not because he believed the WCF presented the system of doctrine contained in the Scriptures, but because of its social implications. In DeWitt's mind, it was the Reformed faith as expressed in the WCF that stood behind the civic freedoms enjoyed by citizens of Great Britain and the United States.¹⁰⁴ DeWitt feared a repeat of the French Revolution with the substantial economic and cultural forces that were at work in nineteenth-century America, and saw the theology of the WCF as the answer.¹⁰⁵ DeWitt seems to have stood in the vein of New School Presbyterianism that prioritized the social implications of Christianity over its truth. Thus, trimming the Calvinistic edges from the WCF would not seem such a leap, given the fact that there was work to be done.

Church History and the Catholic Spirit

DeWitt's view of the purpose of studying history would seem to have also played a role in the confessional revision controversy. Identifying John DeWitt as a technical, academic historian would arguably be erroneous, and it is possible that he would have agreed.¹⁰⁶ DeWitt was, in the tradition of Princeton Seminary, a generalist and a pastor who had found his *niche*, as it were, by preaching biographical and historical sermons. It is tempting, given his status as a teacher of church history, to locate an impetus for his actions in a technical view of history. However, the kinds of historical writing that DeWitt produced were not necessarily of an academic nature. Many of his biographical messages were commemorative in terms of their purpose.¹⁰⁷

Most of his work was done with the intent of edifying his audience in some way, as opposed to advancing research in his field.¹⁰⁸

However, DeWitt's understanding of what church history *does* for those who learn it is helpful in understanding his role in the revision controversy. DeWitt was quite keen on church history's ability to foster a "catholic spirit."¹⁰⁹ In his 1903 address at the dedication of the memorial for James C. Moffat, his predecessor, DeWitt discussed the place of church history at Princeton from Samuel Miller onward. He noted, "Hence, Church History is the least special, the most nearly encyclopaedic of the disciplines. Certainly, whatever else may be said of it, it should be humanizing; and its ideal, I do not say its actual, teacher will be intellectually sensitive on every side, and catholic in his religious sympathies."¹¹⁰ Four years later in an informal address given to the senior class at Princeton Seminary entitled, "Relations of Church History to Preaching," DeWitt attempted to instill in his pupils the value of continuing to read church history as they assumed their pastoral roles. In the midst of that, he placed church history in the context of the seminary curriculum as "the broadening, the cultivating, the catholicizing department of the Seminary."¹¹¹ He went on to say that the study of church history brings to preaching a "catholic and irenic character," so that the preacher can present "the doctrine in a way that does not excite opposition."¹¹²

In his 1883 inaugural lecture at Lane Seminary, *Church History as a Science, as a Theological Discipline, and as a Mode of the Gospel*, delivered in 1883, DeWitt asserted that the historian examines doctrinal variations differently than a theologian. This is self-evident, but he goes on to state that there is a kind of relativizing quality to studying the history of doctrine and even goes so far as to say,

Theologically, we are compelled, when loyal to our vision of the truth which God has revealed, to assert that Arminianism is not only an error, but an error at the center of Theology, and at the center of Soteriology. But, historically, we welcome the Arminian Wesleyan, as a brother beloved, to our pulpits and to our meetings for prayer. We acknowledge the validity of his ordination, and of his administration of the sacraments; and we gladly unite with him as one of the host of the elect in labor for the redemption of the world.¹¹³

He states further, "This familiar example will serve to bring vividly before us the exact influence exerted by the study of History upon the student of Systematic

Theology. Its influence is to imbue the student with the catholic spirit."¹¹⁴

There are conceptual affinities between DeWitt's inaugural address and the one delivered by Henry B. Smith in 1854, "Nature and Worth of the Science of Church History."¹¹⁵ Speaking specifically of the Old/New School divide, Smith argued that church history allowed its student to "distinguish between the essential and the contingent."¹¹⁶ He further stated that such a student will

acquire such breadth of vision, that he will not unnecessarily exalt minor points of difference, even for the sake of displaying his own orthodoxy. It is easy to gain the notoriety of a polemic—little knowledge is needed to that; it is easy to exalt the difference between Old School and New, between Presbyterians and Congregationalists; but it is wiser and better to work together for our common good, and against our common foes.¹¹⁷

Standing behind both Smith and, somewhat indirectly, John DeWitt, is the imposing figure of Augustus Neander. Smith's intellectual debt to Neander has been noted above. When it comes to DeWitt, references to Neander himself in his writings are sparse.¹¹⁸ However, in his inaugural address at Lane, he referred to Neander as "the Church's greatest historian."¹¹⁹ DeWitt recommended students use Neander in his church history classes, and it is known that Neander's works were used as textbooks at Union during DeWitt's time there.¹²⁰ In addition, DeWitt praised his predecessor, James C.

108. Loetscher, "John DeWitt," 222.

109. John DeWitt, *Church History as a Science, as a Theological Discipline, and as a Mode of the Gospel: An Inaugural Discourse* (Cincinnati: Elm Street Printing, 1883), 35, accessed March 1, 2014, <http://archive.org/details/churchhistoryassoodewi>.

110. DeWitt, "The Memorial Tablet to Dr. James C. Moffat," 627.

111. John DeWitt, "Relations of Church History to Preaching," *The Princeton Theological Review* 5, no. 1 (1907): 104, accessed February 28, 2014, <http://journals.ptsem.edu>.

112. DeWitt, 106.

113. DeWitt, *Church History as a Science, as a Theological Discipline, and as a Mode of the Gospel*, 35.

114. DeWitt, 35.

115. DeWitt quotes Smith's inaugural lecture in his own. DeWitt, 30.

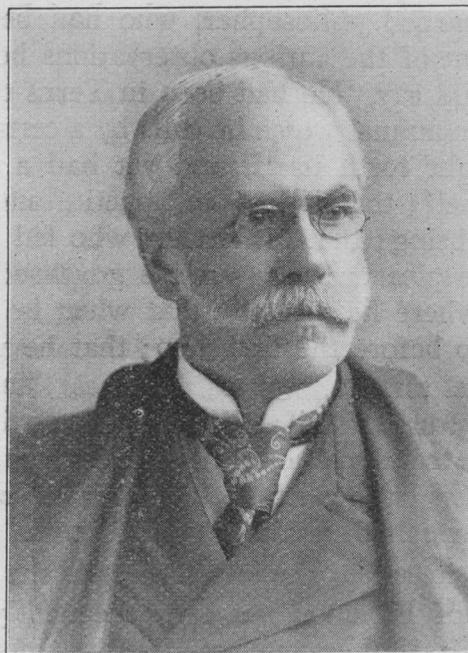
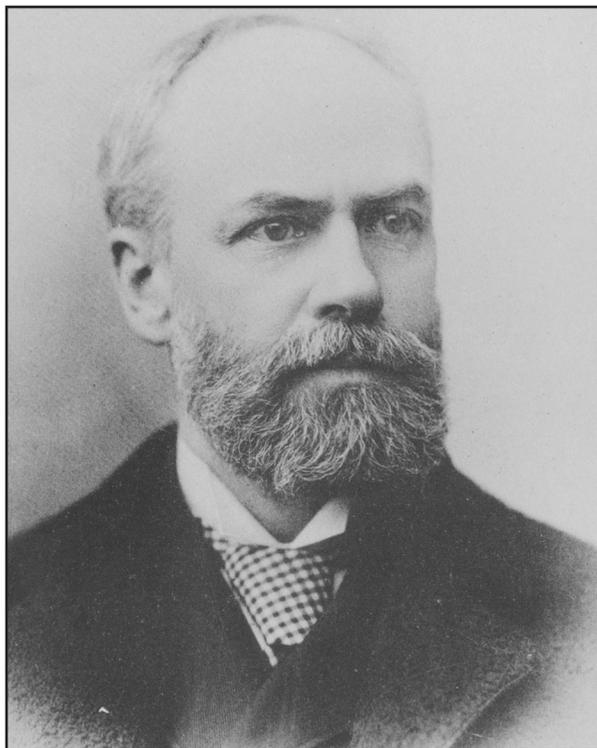
116. Smith, "Science of Church History," 78.

117. Smith, 78–79.

118. DeWitt, "The Memorial Tablet to Dr. James C. Moffat," 629; DeWitt, "William Greenough Thayer Shedd," 300, 302, 317; DeWitt, *Church History as a Science, as a Theological Discipline, and as a Mode of the Gospel*, 6, 21, 37.

119. DeWitt, 37.

120. DeWitt, "Princeton Theological Seminary. Course in Church History," 1; Clark, 80.



Moffat, for having “dwelt with most delight in the spirit of Neander on the Church’s internal life” in his church history courses at Princeton Seminary, which DeWitt would have taken.¹²¹

In a manner similar to DeWitt, Neander was quite adept at the “art of the monographic treatment of great Christian figures and presented the Christian past as a living source for the present.”¹²² In another striking parallel, Neander’s work was characterized as having “suffered from a lack of careful source criticism and was heavily informed by edificatory and inspirational motives.”¹²³ It should also be noted that Neander was described by Schaff thus: “His extended historical studies had served to enlarge his naturally liberal mind to the most comprehensive catholicity.”¹²⁴ It is arguably the case that Neander’s Christo-centric view of the church’s history that stressed the church’s internal life, having been modified by the more conservative Smith but still retaining many of its features, resonated with the New School DeWitt, who emerged from an ecclesiastical tradition that accented work over doctrine and piety over

specifics. This would seemingly have allowed DeWitt, as a professor of church history at Old School Princeton, to acquiesce to the 1903 revisions without fearing the repercussions.

CONCLUSION

John DeWitt’s life and career corresponded with a pivotal moment in American Presbyterianism. The confessional boundaries of the PCUSA began to erode as the denomination sought to keep pace with the rapidly changing United States. John DeWitt acted in accordance with his fairly conservative New School convictions in the revision controversy, but the long-term effect for conservatives in the PCUSA was negative. Within two decades the revision of the WCF would come to fruition, “a broad and often incoherent pluralism.”¹²⁵ It would be another Princeton faculty member, J. Gresham Machen, who would attempt to restore Presbyterian identity.¹²⁶ ■

Above: John DeWitt, D.D., LL.D. (1842–1923), circa 1893, and later in life. Sources: Le Roy J. Halsey, *A History of The McCormick Theological Seminary of the Presbyterian Church* (Chicago: Published by the Seminary, 1893), 438. John De Witt, *Jonathan Edwards: Union Meeting of the Berkshire North and South Conferences, Stockbridge, Massachusetts, October Fifth, 1903. Oration.* (Stockbridge, Mass: Berkshire Conferences, 1903). Courtesy and with permission of The Historical Center of the Presbyterian Church in America.

121. DeWitt, “The Memorial Tablet to Dr. James C. Moffat,” 629.

122. Stoever, “Henry Boynton Smith and the German Theology of History,” 74.

123. Stoever, 74.

124. Schaff, *Saint Augustin, Melancthon, Neander*, 154.

125. Hart and Muether, 203.

126. Hart and Muether, 203.