

The Reorganization of Princeton Theological Seminary and the Exhaustion of American Presbyterianism

By D. G. Hart

Princeton Seminary had a long and accomplished run. From 1812 to 1929 the seminary represented, maintained, and defended a theological tradition—namely, Reformed orthodoxy—that most of the Reformed churches in Europe and North America had abandoned by 1850. Holding on to Calvinism and its predestinarian strains in a democratic and egalitarian culture like the one nurtured in the United States made Old Princeton's longevity even more remarkable. But even if the old adage—all good things must come to an end—does not do justice to what happened to Princeton Seminary between 1919 and 1929, it is a pithy summary of the ten years prior to its reorganization and the founding of an alternative theological school, Westminster. For those who identified then and still do with Princeton's convictions, the events of the 1920s produced great sorrow. J. Gresham Machen, who started to teach at Princeton in 1906 and was central to the developments that prompted the seminary's reorganization, expressed that sadness in this manner:

At first it might seem to be a great calamity, and sad are the hearts of those Christian men and women throughout the world who love the gospel that the old Princeton proclaimed. We cannot fully understand the ways of God in permitting so great a wrong. Yet good may come even out of a thing so evil as that. Perhaps the evangelical people in the Presbyterian Church were too contented, too confident in material resources. Perhaps God has taken away worldly props in order that we may rely more fully upon him. Perhaps the way of sacrifice may prove to be the way of power.¹

These are fitting words for the introduction to a depressing narrative. What happened at Princeton in the 1920s was an unceremonious way for the institution's reputation to conclude and arguably not the best of notes on which to end a commemoration of Old Princeton. But if confessional Presbyterians who look back nostalgically on Princeton are to learn from the

controversy that prompted the seminary's reorganization, they will need to understand how the school changed. Contrary to the common explanation, liberal Protestants did not take over the seminary and force it to comply with the increasing breadth and diversity of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.²

Instead, the reorganization of Princeton was the result of a conflict between evangelical and confessional Presbyterians that had been gathering vigor at least since the reunion of the Old and New School churches in 1869, if not since the Presbyterian Church's first General Assembly. To unpack this account, readers need to pay attention to three sets of developments that the following essay explores in reverse chronological order. Of first concern is what directly prompted the reorganization of Princeton, events that transpired almost exclusively in the town that was home to the seminary. Next come circumstances that set reorganization in motion, many of which concerned developments among Presbyterians in New York City. The final and inner layer of this historical onion are trends within the PCUSA after the reunion of the Old and New School churches that made Princeton's convictions untenable in the wider denomination.

WHAT HAPPENED, 1923–1929

Was the reorganization of Princeton Seminary simply an adjustment to the school's administration? This has

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1. J. Gresham Machen, "Westminster Theological Seminary: Its Purpose and Plan," in *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writings*, ed., D. G. Hart, (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2004), 195.

2. On the spread of theological diversity within the PCUSA, see Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church: A Study of Theological Issues in the Presbyterian Church since 1869* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954).

long been the interpretation of the seminary itself and its parent ecclesiastical organization, the General Assembly of the PCUSA.³ Conservatives contended that the changes gutted Princeton of its theological identity even before Machen and others packed their bags in 1929 to teach at Westminster.⁴ The most accurate assessment is that both answers were reliable even if incomplete. Princeton's reorganization was primarily administrative. It consolidated the Board of Directors (which oversaw academics) and the Board of Trustees (which governed finances) into one board. The restructuring also enlarged the power of the sitting president, J. Ross Stevenson. But such administrative shuffling would not have taken two years to implement and the services of various legal firms if the changes were not also inspired by the controversies that divided liberal and conservative Presbyterians during the 1920s. Consequently, the consolidation of the boards was not merely an administrative convenience; it also meant that the conservatives on the Board of Directors (nineteen out of twenty-eight) were now in the minority on the single board, combined as they were with the trustees which had a minority of identifiable conservatives (four out of twenty-one). In addition, the expansion of Stevenson's power as president was an effort at least in part to give greater control to an administrator who was much more in tune with the PCUSA's bureaucrats than he was with Princeton's theological tradition.

So instead of simply changing the seminary's intellectual course—revising the curriculum, hiring new faculty, amending its subscription oaths—the PCUSA simply made what many hoped would be perceived as cosmetic changes to the school's structures. Even so, this was not a liberal coup within the Presbyterian Church's last bastion of Reformed orthodoxy. None of the faculty were modernists. In fact, most of the opposition to Princeton's Reformed reputation came from

evangelicals, those who believed in the authority of Scripture, the importance of evangelism and missions, and defended the supernatural character of the new birth but who also held that Reformed theology and ministry were accidental to these essential Christian concerns.

Although the formal events of reorganization did not start until the Committee to Investigate Princeton Seminary (appointed by the 1926 General Assembly) started to conduct interviews during the fall of 1926, the controversy within the seminary's personnel began as early as the last Sunday of 1923 when Machen preached his most widely circulated sermon at First Church, Princeton.⁵ He had been the congregation's stated supply for six months and chose his last Sunday in that capacity to address the dangers that liberal theology posed to the church. He declared:

Plain people in the Church are being told, for example, that this preacher or that believes that Jesus is God. They go away impressed. The preacher, they say, believes in the deity of Christ. What more could be desired? What is not being told them is that the word God is being used in a pantheizing or Ritschlian sense so that the assertion Jesus is God is not the most Christian, but the least Christian thing that the Modernist preacher says. The preacher affirms the deity of Jesus, but not because he thinks high of Jesus, but because he thinks desperately low of God. Formerly when men had brought to their attention the perfectly plain documents like the Apostles' Creed or the Westminster Confession or the New Testament they either accepted them or denied them. Now they no longer deny it, but merely interpret. Every generation, it is said, must interpret the Bible or the creed in its own way. But I sometimes wonder just how far this business of interpretation will go.⁶

At this point, Machen walks through a variety of truths to show how intellectually shallow the project of interpretation is. He gives examples from math and history and then concludes with a historical matter of crucial import to the Christian faith. The interlocutor in this hypothetical exchange asks about what happened when Jesus was laid in the tomb 1900 years ago:

To that question also I have a very definite answer. I would tell you what I think happened. I say he was laid in the tomb and then the third day he rose again from the dead. At this point the surprise of my modern friend reaches its height. The idea of a professor in a theological seminary actually believing that the

3. See J. Ross Stevenson, *The Historical Position of Princeton Seminary* (New York: n.p., 1928); and "The Reorganization of Princeton Seminary," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 23 (1929) 2–8.

4. See J. Gresham Machen, *The Attack Upon Princeton Seminary: A Plea for Fair Play* (Princeton, n.p., 1927).

5. On the Presbyterian controversy, see Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); William J. Weston, *Presbyterian Pluralism: Competition in a Protestant House* (Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 1997); and D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994). I am following—surprise—my own interpretation in *Defending the Faith*.

6. J. Gresham Machen, "The Issue in the Church," in *God Transcendent*, ed., Ned B. Stonehouse, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 45.

body of a dead man really emerged from the grave! Everyone, he tells me, has abandoned that answer to the question long ago. But, I say, my friend, this is very serious. That answer stands in the Apostles' Creed as well as in the center of the New Testament. Do you not accept the Apostles' Creed? Oh, yes, says my friend, of course I accept the Apostles' Creed. Do we not say it every Sunday in church or do we not sing it? Of course I accept the Apostles' Creed. But then do you not see every generation has a right to interpret the creed in its own way? And so now, of course, we accept the proposition that the third day he arose again from the dead, but we interpret that to mean the third day he did not rise from the dead.⁷

Machen's sermon was provocative and intentionally so. Earlier in the year he had published *Christianity and Liberalism*, a book that argued liberalism was an entirely different religion. Still, neither he nor the session at First Church could have expected the reaction of a prominent member of the congregation. Henry Van Dyke, a friend of Machen's, former ambassador to the Netherlands, and retired professor of English literature at Princeton University, resigned his membership at First Church and held a press conference to announce his decision. His reason was Machen's preaching. Van Dyke could not tolerate any more of such a "dismal, bilious travesty of the gospel."⁸ Newspaper editors carried the story of Van Dyke's resignation and the account circulated across the nation at a time when Presbyterian developments merited front-page coverage. Editors also excerpted Machen's sermon, thus insuring a wide reading. In effect, this sermon and the controversy surrounding it at First Church became the conservative equivalent of Harry Emerson Fosdick's "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?," a sermon often regarded as the opening salvo of the so-called fundamentalist-modernist controversy. The episode also turned Machen into a mini-celebrity. He wrote to his mother that reporters were "as thick as flies" at his door after the incident.⁹ This notoriety also insured that Machen would be the conservative to whom many editors, academics, and conference organizers would turn when they needed a Protestant from the theological right.

Soon after Machen's stint as preacher, First Church's session turned to another Princeton Seminary faculty member to fill the pulpit, Charles Erdman, a Presbyterian with evangelical convictions and almost two decades of experience at the seminary. He grew up in the revivalist and dispensationalist ethos of Dwight L. Moody's evangelism and organizations. Erdman's father

was one of Moody's back-up revivalists. Erdman himself wrote a glowing biography of Moody. He was also an editor of *The Fundamentals*, the pamphlet series published during the 1910s that brought together a diverse group of scholars and popular speakers to defend the authority of Scripture and (for some) a premillennial view of the second coming. In other words, Erdman had fairly close connections to the theological and institutional world that produced fundamentalism. And yet he turned out to be Machen's biggest foe, at least in the village of Princeton.

The conflict between Erdman and Machen played out in several ways almost immediately after Machen stepped down from pulpit supply at First Church.¹⁰ First, when Erdman replaced Machen as the regular preacher, Van Dyke returned to the congregation, an action that prompted the conservative weekly, *The Presbyterian*, to raise questions about Erdman's soundness. Because Machen was an associate editor at the magazine, Erdman published a letter that identified Princeton colleagues as the ones responsible for questioning him (even though Machen had not authored the piece). Next, at the 1924 General Assembly Clarence Macartney, a conservative pastor from Philadelphia and a member of Princeton's Board of Directors, was nominated for moderator and ran against Erdman. When Machen supported Macartney over Erdman, the practical theologian regarded Machen's action as personally motivated. Finally, during the 1924–1925 academic year, the student body at Princeton, much concerned about liberalism, asked for a faculty advisor different from Erdman, whom they believed to be indifferent to their concerns. Again, Erdman interpreted this personally and attributed the action to Machen's efforts to undermine his credibility.

These tensions came to a head at the 1926 General Assembly when commissioners voted to form a committee that would investigate the struggles at Princeton Seminary (this was a follow up to the Special Committee of 1925—more below—whose task was to investigate the conflict between liberals and conservatives in the denomination at large). The investigation of Princeton was one of the more remarkable developments in the Presbyterian controversy if only because it revealed how far removed the seminary's conservative faculty were from the mainstream of the denomination. Scholars ranging

7. Machen, "The Issue in the Church," 46–47.

8. Van Dyke quoted in Hart, *Defending the Faith*, 60.

9. Machen quoted in Hart, *Defending the Faith*, 66.

10. On the struggle within Princeton Presbyterianism during the 1920s, see Hart, *Defending the Faith*, ch. 5.

from Geerhardus Vos to Caspar Wiſtar Hodge testified about the Old School character of the seminary and implicitly endorsed Machen's arguments and conduct throughout the controversy. Erdman himself recognized that he had misinterpreted much of the opposition to him and had unfairly blamed Machen.¹¹ Even so, the commission decided that for the better order of the seminary it should reorganized administratively. This would be particularly important for bringing Princeton from conservative isolationist position into the denomination's tolerant center.¹² Clearing legal objections took two years but by 1929 the General Assembly approved the reorganization, a decision by which Machen could not abide. During that summer he performed Herculean feats to establish a new seminary and have it ready by the fall of 1929 to offer classes. The immediate and local factor that prompted the changes at Princeton and the start of Westminster was the rivalry among pastors and theological faculty within the confines of Princeton's Presbyterian community.

THE HISTORY BEFORE WHAT HAPPENED, 1922–1925

Of course, what happened at Princeton between 1923 and 1929 did not occur in isolation, in which case developments a little to the north of the small New Jersey town are crucial to understanding the conflicts that divided Princeton Seminary's faculty and administrators. New York City was traditionally on the wrong side of Presbyterian controversies, going back to the colonial division between the Old and New Side Presbyterians and to the antebellum conflict between the Old and New School churches. New York's Presbyterians kept their record intact into the twentieth century by cultivating the ecclesiastical soil in which modernism thrived and to which conservatives like Machen objected. In fact, most historians trace the origins of the 1920s Presbyterian controversy to the sermon Harry Emerson Fosdick preached in May of 1922, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" That Fosdick, a liberal Baptist preacher, was stated supply at First Church, New York City, only made the situation worse (though it also gave

the Presbytery of New York an alibi—namely, that his preaching did not accurately reflect the views of the city's Presbyterian ministers). Fosdick's sermon voiced alarm at the prospect of a fundamentalist takeover of the church. This alarm said more about the preacher's identity as a Baptist than it did about Presbyterian developments since by 1922 the Southern and Northern Baptist conventions were lining up in liberal and fundamentalist camps. The term "fundamentalist" was in fact Baptist provenance. In his sermon, Fosdick made two points. The first was to call for greater tolerance and liberty so that the church would not lose smart modern young persons. The second was to call attention to the truly important problems confronting the church. He even found it hard to believe that any serious Christian could regard the inspiration of Scripture or the virgin birth of Christ as more significant than the persecution that Armenians were experiencing from the Turks.¹³

As it turned out, Presbyterians in the United States were still concerned to defend the virgin birth, especially after the Presbytery of New York, about the same time that Fosdick preached his inflammatory sermon, ordained two men who would not affirm (they did not deny) the virgin birth. This was a highly controversial action because in 1892, 1910, and 1916 the PCUSA had affirmed the virgin birth as one of five essential and necessary articles of the faith (along with the vicarious atonement, the resurrection of Christ, inerrancy, and Christ's miraculous work). Conservatives responded not simply to Fosdick's sermon but also to New York's lax standards for ordination. One conservative voice was, of course, Machen with his book, *Christianity and Liberalism*, published in 1923. Another was an overture from the Presbytery of Philadelphia, where Clarence Macartney ministered, that called upon the General Assembly to reaffirm its five essential and necessary articles of faith. The conservative reaction was sufficiently strong for the 1923 Assembly to uphold once again the virgin birth.

Still, New York's liberals were not finished. They replied to conservative arguments with the *Auburn Affirmation*. This was a short, six-point document that echoed Fosdick's call for greater liberty and toleration within the church. Their constitutional arguments had merit and received Machen's approval. Here the Affirmationists denied that a General Assembly had power to determine essential and necessary articles. The history of the PCUSA, in fact, located the power and standards of ordination not in the highest judicatory but in presbyteries. But the Affirmationists went on to question whether the essential and necessary articles, upheld by the Assembly, were really capable of a uniform and consistent

11. See "Transcript of the Hearings by the General Assembly's Special Committee to Visit Princeton Theological Seminary," Machen Archives, Montgomery Memorial Library, Westminster Theological Seminary.

12. See *Report of the Special Committee to Visit Princeton Theological Seminary to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., San Francisco, California, May, 1927* (Presbyterian Church U.S.A., General Assembly, 1927).

13. See Longfield, *Presbyterian Controversy*, ch. 1; and Edwin H. Rian, *The Presbyterian Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Eerdsman's, 1940), ch. 2.

interpretation. The Affirmation's signers—1,300 in all (out of roughly 4,500 total in the PCUSA)—all affirmed the truths taught by the essential and necessary articles. They also claimed that these doctrines were merely theories that communicated truths that could be worded in any number of ways. This hermeneutical turn of mind was precisely what had prompted Machen to go into a prolonged sarcastic retort to modern theories of interpretation in his controversial and widely circulated sermon at First Church, Princeton.¹⁴

The tension between liberals, based in New York, and conservatives, strong in Philadelphia, was so great that only a committee—the Presbyterian solution to everything—could resolve it. This committee, called the Special Commission of 1925, was decisive for ending conservative hopes for reform of the church. The committee interviewed leading voices from both sides of the debate—Machen and Macartney on the conservative side, William Adams Brown, a theologian at Union Seminary in New York, and Henry Sloan Coffin, an outspoken liberal minister in New York City, on the liberal side—to hear various explanations about the sources of controversy. Machen himself identified five disturbing occurrences or trends: the 1920 Plan of Organic Union (more below), Fosdick's preaching, the *Auburn Affirmation*, the Presbytery of New York's ordination of candidates who did not affirm the virgin birth, and the general tone of the denomination's boards and agencies. What Machen meant by this last item was this:

...the great outstanding fact is that the boards and agencies are signally failing to sound any clear evangelical note in the present time of crisis, when the Christian religion all over the world is in the midst of one of the greatest conflicts in its entire history. There are two possible positions that mission boards at home and abroad may take. They may seek to save mankind by Christian influences or Christian principles of Christian civilization; or they may seek to be instruments of God in saving mankind by a new birth of individual men brought about by the Spirit of God using the gospel of the cross of Christ. If the latter position is taken, the former must be abandoned; the first step in evangelization is to destroy the confidence of men in human goodness, in order that recourse may be had simply and solely to the cross of Christ... [T]hat position is certainly not being taken in any clear and unequivocal way by the boards and agencies.¹⁵

This was a pithy way of contrasting a social gospel that sought to win the world for Christ through the

transformation of culture and the historic gospel that depended on the proclamation of the cross and the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit. It was the fundamental dynamic that Machen explained in *Christianity and Liberalism*. But the PCUSA was so steeped in the gospel of Christian civilization that its officers and members had trouble discerning the difference between conservative and modernist arguments.

Consequently, when the Special Commission brought the first installment of its report to the General Assembly of 1926, they did exactly what Machen had described as characteristic of the denomination's agencies. The committee failed to "sound a clear evangelical note" in the Presbyterian Church's "time of crisis." Instead, the committee gave the denomination a clean bill of health.

It is our deep conviction that the great body of the church is sound in faith even when that faith is tested by the strictest standards. It holds fast to the historic faith in God's relation to this universe as its creator and the vital and unifying governing personality who imparts to the system order, stability and moral purpose... In these weighty Christian verities as held by the Presbyterian Church throughout its entire history and only briefly cataloged here, we have a body of doctrine and a system of polity which binds us into a close and abiding unity, a priceless and common inheritance from the past which vests the title of heirship in every one of us without distinction. This is a tremendous fact that must not be forgotten when we are reflecting upon differences. In spite of the wide geographical distances separating our churches and ministers, in spite of various racial roots which reach back into the centuries and which are fed on sentiments that provoked national wars and reddened the earth with blood, historic conflicts, in spite of every extreme of difference in residence and education, in social contacts and lifelong customs, here we stand a church with one heart beating at the center of its corporate life, bound together by the firm ties of a shining record that embraces the sacrifices and triumphs of the past, of a faith engaging the rich loyalties and abundant labors of the present and of a hope yearning, but sure and drawing into it stimulating experience, the holy promise of a fairer future bound into a unity which we believe our generation will not break.¹⁶

14. See Longfield, *Presbyterian Controversy*, ch. 4; and Rian, ch. 2.

15. Machen, "Statement to the Special Commission of 1925," in *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writings*, 295.

16. "Report of the Special Commission of 1925 to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., Baltimore, Maryland, May, 1926" (Presbyterian Church U.S.A., General Assembly, 1926), 65–66.

In addition to finding the church to be sound and reliable, the Special Committee made recommendations that were of great consequence to conservatives. Its third piece of advice addressed specifically how to express criticisms of the church, its officers, and members. On the one hand, the Assembly welcomed the discussion by pastors, elders, and the laity of great theological and practical matters. On the other hand, Presbyterians had a duty to exercise “patience and forbearance,” and to refrain from public expression of hasty or harsh judgments of the motives of brethren whose hearts are known only to God.” The committee also specified that disagreements should avoid “calumny” but should instead follow the prescribed way of the book of church order. The aim of such debate should be to “persuade the minds and win the hearts of men,” and “stimulate the Church to greater activity in carrying forward its task and encourage all to provoke one another to love and good works.”¹⁷ Because liberals in the church—Fosdick was not technically in the church—were not the ones voicing objections to teachings and trends in the denomination, readers of the report would have been justified in seeing conservatives as the object of this recommendation. Machen especially, because of the success and popularity of *Christianity and Liberalism*, was an example of a minister who had not followed the prescribed way of Presbyterian order. Still, no matter whom commissioners may have had in mind when deliberating on these recommendations, the message of the Special Committee was clear—if you are going to disagree your objection better be positive and build others up; if not, you are guilty of engaging in “harsh and hasty judgments.”

This report was the significant piece of history that happened before the reorganization of Princeton Seminary. In fact, the Special Committee provided the rationale for reorganization. Not only was the seminary the place where Machen taught and that housed the denomination’s leading critics of theological liberalism, but Princeton’s reputation for polemical theology was precisely the sort of identity the PCUSA wanted to leave behind. During the 1920s, the denomination identified increasingly with the slogan, “doctrine divides, ministry unites.” In that setting, Princeton, the oldest agency of the PCUSA, was a pain in the neck that required a visit to the ecclesiastical chiropractor.

17. “Report of the Special Commission of 1925,” 80.

18. Arguably the best historical perspective on Witherspoon comes from Mark A. Noll, *Princeton and the Republic, 1768–1822: The Search for a Christian Enlightenment in the Era of Samuel Stanhope Smith*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), chs. 3–4.

THE HISTORY BEFORE THE HISTORY BEFORE WHAT HAPPENED, 1789–1920

The recommendations from the Special Commission of 1925 did not occur in a vacuum. If the reorganization of Princeton Seminary was part of historical developments that played out both locally within the institutions of a New Jersey small town and regionally in the conflict between Philadelphia conservatives and New York modernists, the demise of Old Princeton was also the culmination of trends in the PCUSA going back to the 1869 reunion of the Old and New School churches and beyond. To put this history simply, American Presbyterianism collapsed, broke apart, fell on, and then crushed Princeton Seminary. Conservative faculty at Princeton were not merely victims. To use recent academic vernacular: they had “agency,” meaning, they were capable of resisting historical trends, and Machen did so notably with the founding of Westminster. At the same time, contemporary Presbyterians who think that saving Princeton might have righted the ship of American Presbyterianism have not considered the long term trajectory of choices that church leaders made going all the way back to the first General Assembly.

Start with that 1789 Assembly, for instance, and wonder about the decision to name the denomination, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Taking the name of the new nation was not the only option. The PCUSA could have been the Presbyterian Church in North America if they had taken cues from the Covenanters (the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America) or the Seceders (the United Presbyterian Church of North America). But so closely did the officers and members of the PCUSA identify with the new nation that they adopted a name that put church and state next to each other. One factor in this decision could well have been the influence of John Witherspoon, president of the College of New Jersey, minister in the PCUSA, and the only clerical signer of the Declaration of Independence. He was, in other words, not only an important voice in national affairs but he was also a significant figure in the creation of a General Assembly and the national consolidation of the Presbyterian churches that had first come together in 1706 at the Presbytery of Philadelphia.¹⁸

Witherspoon’s blend of politics and theology was best expressed in a sermon he preached roughly six weeks before the publication of the Declaration of Independence. “The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men” was the sermon’s title, and when Witherspoon delivered it at a church in Philadelphia, members of the Continental Congress heard it and recommended that the sermon

be printed and distributed throughout the colonies. Witherspoon was by no means a political or religious radical. He encouraged colonists to look to God for deliverance and exhorted them to holiness so that their political cause would be just. But Witherspoon also lost touch with important features of Reformed theology when he spoke of the need for unity in the cause of political independence. At the close of the sermon, he said:

He is the best friend to American liberty who is most sincere and active in promoting true and undefiled religion and who sets himself with a great firmness to bear down profanity and immorality of every kind. Whoever is an avowed enemy to God, I scruple not to call him an enemy to his country. Do not suppose, my brethren, that I mean to recommend a furious and angry zeal for the circumstantialities of religion or the contentions of one sect with another about their peculiar distinctions.¹⁹

Here Witherspoon employs a distinction between the generalities of religion and the particulars of a denomination or sect as he uses the word. This was in fact the same sort of distinction against which Machen railed in *Christianity and Liberalism* because the effort to separate the kernel from the husk of Christianity, especially for political or social purposes, inevitably gutted the faith of those doctrines and truths that were the most difficult to tame and the most basic to Christ's saving work. Witherspoon added, "I do not wish you to oppose anybody's religion but everybody's wickedness. Perhaps there are few surer marks of the reality of religion than when a man feels himself more joined in spirit to a truly holy person of a different denomination than to an irregular liver of his own."²⁰

He may not have intended to regard morality as more important than doctrine or church polity, but it was clearly an implication of his attempt to rally Christians to the side of political independence. What is clear is that Witherspoon did not want differences among denominations to become an obstacle to the struggle for liberty. He even taught that the spirit of Christianity that united fellow believers across denominational barriers was the true form of faith. The consequence of this position is that Reformed convictions may need to be sacrificed for the sake of politics.

If the Presbyterian Church's identification with the United States' political ideals was strong during the heady days of political independence, by the time of the Civil War they had become commonplace and equally consequential for the reception of Princeton Seminary's faculty and graduates. Of course, at the beginning of the war

the Old School church split along sectional lines when Gardner Spring sought support for the federal government against the states from the 1861 General Assembly. Charles Hodge, not generally regarded as a vigorous defender of the doctrine of the spirituality of the church, wrote against the Spring Resolution by likening such an endorsement of the state to singing the Star Spangled Banner at the administration of the Lord's Supper.²¹

Protests such as that, however, could not prevent the triumph of social and political considerations over theology when the Old and New Schools decided to reunite after the war. In fact, basic to the proposed plan of union was an assessment of the United States' social conditions. Instead of looking to biblical teaching on the unity of the church, American Presbyterians came to the conviction that only a reunited church could most effectively minister to the nation that the United States had become:

...throughout the world during the last 30 years the period of our separation, arrest and compel attention. Within this time the original number of our states has been very nearly doubled and all this vast domain is to be supplied with the means of education and the institutions of religion as the only source and protection of our national life. The population crowding into this immense area is heterogeneous six millions of immigrants representing various religious and nationalities have arrived on our shores within the last 30 years. And four millions of slaves recently enfranchised demand Christian education. It is no secret that anti Christian forces, Romanism, Ecclesiasticism, Rationalism, infidelity, Materialism and Paganism itself assuming new vitality are struggling for ascendancy. Christian forces should be combined and deployed according to the new movements of their adversaries. It is no time for small and weak detachments that may easily be defeated in detail. A lesson has been given us in recent years as to the ease with which diversities of sentiment may be harmonized and combined into one purpose, to maintain the national life.²²

These new social conditions also affected the Presbyterian Church's appropriation of its Reformation heritage.

19. John Witherspoon, *The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men: A Sermon, Preached at Princeton, on the 17th of May, 1776* (Philadelphia: Booksellers in Town and Country, 1776), 33.

20. Witherspoon, *The Dominion of Providence*, 33.

21. On the division in the Old School church along sectional lines, see Lewis G. Vander Velde, *The Presbyterian Churches and the Federal Union, 1861-1869* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932).

22. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (Old School)* (1868), 670.

The controversies and church splits of the sixteenth century were fine in their place, but the nineteenth century demanded a different response from the church:

It cannot be denied that there exists a wide spread and earnest longing for a more visible unity among all classes of Christian people. Many of the ecclesiastical organizations of Protestant Europe had their origins in remote controversies connected with the Reformation. That was a time for the assertion of truth rather than for the expressions of love. Nothing is so long lived and inveterate as ancestral memories and prejudices. Before the world we are now engaged as a nation in solving the problem of whether it is possible of all the incongruous and antagonistic nationalities thrown upon our shores exerting their mutual attraction and repulsion to become fixed in one new American sentiment. If the several branches of the Presbyterian Church in this country representing to a great degree ancestral differences should become cordially united, it must have not only a direct effect upon the question of our national unity, but reacting by the force of a successful example on the old world must render aid in that direction to all who are striving to reconsider and readjust those combinations.²³

The reunion of the Old and New School churches in 1869 launched the great period of Protestant ecumenism that redirected most of mainline Protestantism between the Civil War and World War I. Not only did Presbyterians assume important positions of leadership in ecumenical organizations, but also the very rationale for church unity during this period followed the logic of the 1869 Plan of Union, namely, the church in service of the nation. This ecumenical movement was responsible for greater efforts to unite Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, such as the Alliance of Reformed Churches, founded as an international agency in 1875 through the efforts of Philip Schaff. Church unity among Presbyterians also accounted for the 1906 merger between the PCUSA and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, a union that required the church of Hodge and Warfield in 1903 to revise its confession of faith to adjust to the views of Cumberland Presbyterians who had historically denied federal theology,

election, and predestination. Outside Reformed circles, the drive for greater unity in 1908 prompted the formation of the Federal Council of Churches, the umbrella organization for the largest Protestant denominations in the United States. Running throughout these ecumenical developments was the demand that the churches respond to the needs of the United States. Confirmation of this impulse was one of the very first actions taken by the Federal Council of Churches, namely, a social creed for the churches that advocated a variety of social policies to harmonize the relations between big business and American workers.²⁴

After World War I, Protestant ecumenism produced yet another iteration of ecclesiastical cooperation, this time with a proposed organic union of the denominations already within the Federal Council. Instead of a federated structure, the 1920 Plan of Union sought the creation of a single ecclesiastical entity, hence an organic union. As farfetched and as expensive as this plan turned out to be—and for that reason the churches rejected it—it was sufficiently appealing that Protestants in Canada in 1925 did achieve a union of Anglicans, Methodists, and Presbyterians in the form of the United Church of Canada. Implicit in these proposals was an assumption that the differences among Baptists, Methodists, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians were inconsequential; in fact, these bodies agreed on so much, especially on endeavors to Christianize the nation, that they should join together at the very least for the sake of efficiency.

The 1920 Plan for Organic Union was both the culmination of Protestant ecumenism and the Social Gospel during the Progressive Era and the chief catalyst for conflicts at Princeton Seminary. At the General Assembly of 1920 where commissioners deliberated on the Plan, Machen was at his first national assembly. There he saw and heard the president of Princeton Seminary, J. Ross Stevenson, who also served on the committee for organic union, deliver a positive report on the proposed Plan. The session of the Assembly when Stevenson presented was the beginning of the conflict that would lead to the seminary's reorganization. After the Assembly, Machen and other Princeton faculty wrote articles against the Plan. Machen also formed ties to conservative Presbyterians in southeastern Pennsylvania who opposed the Plan. He gave a talk to the Presbytery of Chester, which in fact became the basis for his book, *Christianity and Liberalism*. With Machen playing a leading role, Princeton Seminary would fight heroically to resist trends that were turning American

23. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (Old School)* (1868), 671.

24. On postbellum Protestant ecumenism, see D. G. Hart, "The Tie that Divides: Presbyterian Ecumenism, Fundamentalism, and the History of Twentieth-century American Protestantism," *Westminster Theological Journal* 60 (1998) 85–107.

Protestantism, along with the PCUSA, liberal. But by the 1920s that struggle was a losing battle.

Aside from the Special Committee of 1925's report, which whitewashed conditions in the church, another indication of the PCUSA's course was also evident at the 1926 Assembly when that committee revealed its first findings. Another item of business on the Assembly's docket was the promotion of Machen to full professor of apologetics and ethics at Princeton. But because he had cast a negative vote against a motion in support of Prohibition at the spring meeting of the Presbytery of New Brunswick, commissioners wondered whether Machen was trustworthy to take on the new responsibilities. After all, throughout the 1920s the PCUSA's General Assembly had repeatedly supported the Eighteenth Amendment and the Volstead Act—much after the fashion of the 1861 Old School General Assembly endorsing the federal government. What is more, part of Machen's duties in the new teaching post would be to teach ethics and many worried that a man who could not support Prohibition would not be fit to teach Christian morality to prospective ministers. Some even thought Machen was a drunkard, an insinuation not all that remote for Carl McIntire's claim that the Machen family made its money by running bootleg liquor during Prohibition.²⁵

To answer his critics, Machen wrote a statement in which he tried to explain his vote. On the one hand:

...no one has a greater horror of the evils of drunkenness than I or a greater detestation of any corrupt traffic which has sought to make profit out of this terrible sin. It is clearly the duty of the church to combat this evil. With regard to the exact form, however, in which the power of civil government is to be used in this battle, there may be a difference of opinion. Zeal for temperance, for example, would hardly justify an order that all drunkards should be summarily butchered. The end in that case would not justify the means. Some men hold that the Eighteenth Amendment and the Volstead Act are not a wise method of dealing with the problem of intemperance and that, indeed, those measures in the effort to accomplish moral good, are really causing moral harm. I am not expressing any opinion on this question now and did not do so by my vote in the presbytery of New Brunswick, but I do maintain that those who hold the view that I have just mentioned have a perfect right to their opinion so far as the law of our church is concerned.²⁶

On the other hand, Machen asserted that the church

should not engage in political or social activism, first by citing the Confession of Faith, chapter 31, paragraph 4, and then by appealing to the spirituality of the church, a doctrine that Old School Presbyterians had employed to oppose New School designs to Christianize the United States. Machen wrote:

In making of itself, moreover, in so many instances primarily an agency of law enforcement and, thus, engaging in the duties of the police, the church I am constrained to think is in danger of losing sight of its proper function which is that of bringing to bear upon human souls the sweet influences of the gospel. Important, indeed, are the functions of the police and members of the church in their capacity as citizens should aid by every proper means within their power in securing the discharge of those functions, but the duty of the church in its corporate capacity is of a quite different kind.²⁷

The 1926 Assembly decided to postpone Machen's nomination for the chair of apologetics and favored instead the appointment of a committee to investigate Princeton Seminary. That Assembly was the beginning of the end for Old Princeton. But it was also the culmination of almost 150 years of Presbyterian involvement with the politics and social order of the American nation, both on its own terms and as part of the so-called Protestant establishment. From this longer perspective, then, the claim makes sense that the larger entanglements between American Presbyterianism and cultural transformation came crashing down on the formidable but small seminar in the village of Princeton, New Jersey. The Princeton faculty gave it their best to avoid being hit by the debris. But their reinforcements were weak compared to the momentum and size of a church that had identified with the American nation. As a consequence, Princeton Seminary became a casualty in American Presbyterianism's ongoing quest to be a church worthy of the United States.²⁸

THE EXHAUSTION OF AMERICAN PRESBYTERIANISM

Another way to consider the health of American Presbyterianism at the time of Princeton's reorganization is to look for indications of intellectual and theological

25. For a fuller account of these developments, see Hart, *Defending the Faith*, chs. 3, 6.

26. Machen, "Statement on the Eighteenth Amendment," in *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writings*, 394–95.

27. Machen, "Statement on the Eighteenth Amendment," 396.

28. See Hart, *Defending the Faith*, ch. 5.

vitality at both Westminster and Princeton after 1929. When Machen looked for faculty to teach at the new Philadelphia seminary, in which direction did he turn? The same question applies to the New Princeton. When the new administration began to construct a new image, where did it find churchmen to lead and faculty to teach at the reorganized seminary? The answer in both cases is not the American Presbyterian Church. Instead, Westminster and the New Princeton drew energy from Reformed traditions and communions outside the United States. In other words, the cupboards of American Presbyterianism were bare and needed to be stocked by the international (primarily European) Reformed community.

The case of Westminster is better known to those who still lament the loss of Old Princeton.²⁹ Machen drew heavily from contacts with Dutch-American Calvinism to find scholars for the new seminary. Cornelius Van Til is arguably the best known, a professor of apologetics for his entire academic career at Westminster whose appropriation of Abraham Kuyper's neo-Calvinism left a lasting mark on the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and segments within the Presbyterian Church in America. Joining Van Til and Westminster's faculty were two other Dutch-Americans, R. B. Kuiper, who taught practical theology to many in the first generation of Westminster students, and Ned B. Stonehouse, a professor of New Testament and biographer of Machen, whose influence on the seminary and the OPC was disproportionate to his own celebrity. Not only did Stonehouse solidify the biblical theology of Gerhaardus Vos as a staple within conservative American Presbyterian circles, but his ecumenical work in various ecumenical committees and agencies drew the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and other Protestants associated with her into the world of international Calvinism.

Another outsider on Westminster's faculty with a long shadow was John Murray, a Scotsman reared in the Free Presbyterian Church whose exegetical theology set the standard for theological method for many in the OPC and the PCA. Granted, all of these hyphenated Americans, except for Kuiper, had studied with Machen at Old Princeton, an indication perhaps of some form of cultural assimilation. Still, all of these professors held on to and transmitted to students important features of the teaching and piety of non-American Reformed

traditions. As a result, conservative Presbyterianism in the United States after 1929 would feature important differences from the ethos and customs of the American church that had sustained Old Princeton.

At New Princeton the institution followed a similar course even though the direction would take longer to develop. J. Ross Stevenson remained president until his death in 1937 and during this time Princeton limped along. The seminary faced a public relations conundrum that even the most gifted administration could not have solved. On the one hand, Princeton maintained that reorganization had changed nothing aside from the administrative structures. On the other hand, the seminary and its parent denomination knew that Princeton could not retain its Old School Presbyterian outlook without causing further additional ecclesiastical conflicts. As such, Stevenson faced an impossible situation. Only when the administration appointed a Scotsman, James MacKay, who grew up in the Free Presbyterian Church and a graduate of Old Princeton, did the seminary find a way through the impasse of reorganization. But it required finding a course that avoided American conventions about conservatism, liberalism, and evangelicalism.³⁰

With the help of European scholars, who were often political refugees and associated with the "Theology of Crisis" or neo-orthodoxy, MacKay arrived at a seemingly conservative position for Princeton. He recruited Emil Brunner for the academic year, 1938–1939, and hoped Brunner would become a permanent member of the faculty. In addition to Brunner, Mackay recruited Otto Piper, a German theologian who had succeeded Barth at Muenster, Joseph Hromádka, a Czech theologian who escaped his homeland after Nazi occupation through ecumenical leaders in Geneva, and two French scholars, Georges Barrois, a philosophical theologian, and Emile Cailliet, an archaeologist. Rounding out Princeton's international faculty were George Hendry, a Presbyterian from Scotland who did advanced work at Tübingen and Berlin, and Edward J. Jurji, a Lebanese scholar of world religions. By cultivating these scholars who were part of the European neo-orthodox rejection of liberalism, MacKay could claim to be maintaining the seminary's conservative reputation without having to follow the specifics of Old Princeton's Reformed convictions.

If the exhaustion of American Presbyterianism, as these international developments at Westminster and Princeton in the 1930s suggest, is an important factor in the demise of Old Princeton, then the lesson from the seminary's reorganization may be a simple one.

29. On the founding of Westminster and Machen's legacy, see *ibid.*, ch. 6 and epilogue.

30. On MacKay's presidency at Princeton, see John MacKay Metzger, *The Hand and the Road: The Life and Times of John MacKay* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2010), 195–240.

Seminaries cannot protect the churches they serve from error or defection. To be sure, conservative Presbyterians who regard Old Princeton highly benefit from the scholarship that seminary faculty produce. They also look to the graduates of specific seminaries as men who have the correct views on theology and ministry. Yet, seminaries are invariably only as good as the churches they serve. They cannot carry an entire communion on their back, as if the appointment of the next systematic theologian is as important as the training of elders in a Philadelphia congregation, or the catechesis of children in a suburban home outside Montgomery, Alabama. Old Princeton had a great run from 1812 to 1929, and it was almost single-handedly responsible for reviving

the older outlook of Reformed orthodoxy. But it was a flawed institution and one of its greatest difficulties was its relationship to its parent denomination. As much as seminaries can bring theological coherence to a communion, they can also go astray by trying to maintain cordial relations with their sponsoring churches. Consequently, as important as seminaries are for the health of our churches, the churches themselves have as much a burden for theological reflection and faithful ministry as seminaries. If and when seminaries go bad, the churches are as likely to blame as is the school. In addition to needing good seminaries like Old Princeton, we need good Reformed churches to support and oversee seminaries. ■

In Brief: Warfield, On the Expansion of the Seminary

Extracted from *The Expansion of the Seminary: A Historical Sketch* by Benjamin B. Warfield, Acting President of the Seminary. May 5, 1914. Princeton: Privately Printed, 1914.

It was not the purpose of the founders of Princeton Theological Seminary to train, as it has been phrased, average pastors for average churches. It was their purpose to train high-class pastors who should by their ministrations make high-class churches. They had indeed two main objects in view. First, to increase the number of ministers by providing new facilities for educating young men for the sacred office. Secondly, notably to raise the standard of attainment of the aspirants to the sacred office. They believed that the methods of training students for the ministry previously in vogue in the Church which they served were not only hopelessly inadequate to overtake the increasing demand for ministers, but also sorely ineffective for providing the highly trained type of minister needed by a Church striving to conquer the world to Christ. They were profoundly convinced that the minister who needs not to be ashamed must be richly supplied not only with piety but with learning. They believed, as they themselves phrase it in the Introduction to the *Plan* which they prepared as the organic law of the Institution they were founding, “that religion without learning,” no less than “learning without religion must ultimately prove injurious to the Church.” “Solid learning,” in their own phrase, therefore, was what they proposed to put within the reach of the student of the ministry; and they proposed, (again to use their own language), to make the acquisition of this “solid learning” “indispensable.”

Even this wide and well-ordered curriculum did not represent, however, all that the founders of the Seminary had in mind to provide the prospective ministers of the Church in the way of opportunities of learning. It announced only what they had in mind to require as the minimum attainment of all those who proposed to enter the ministry. It was in their mind to place within the reach of students for the ministry further and still wider and higher attainments. Their lofty ideal of the learning which was, in their view, not the adornment merely of the man of God, but his indispensable instrument in prosecuting his sacred work, determined, indeed, the whole form and character given the Institution which they founded.... The determining considerations which led ultimately to the foundation of a single central Seminary, instead of two or several, are frankly declared to include among them these two: that by thus concentrating the resources of the Church in one Institution a considerable number of Professors might be employed in the cultivation of the distinct departments of sacred learning, and a really great library might be built up—in these considerations there is revealed to us the determining purpose of the founders of the Seminary in giving it its form. In all their arrangements for the Seminary, it was the ideal thus revealed which controlled the provisions made; and this ideal was so deeply impressed upon the Institution that it has governed its development throughout its whole history. ■