

The Theological Climate of the Early Nineteenth Century and the Founding of a Polemical Seminary at Princeton

By Allen Stanton

“The church has to fight for every inch of ground; and whenever she ceases to contend for the truth, she ceases to advance. She may contend with an improper spirit. If she does this, it is her mistake and her sin. But to contend no more, is to disregard the command of her Master in heaven, and betray his cause to the enemy.”—Samuel Miller, *The Primitive and Apostolic Order of the Church of Christ Vindicated*¹

“What is called the dogmatic spirit is not popular among men. It is characterized by an authoritative method of presenting truth; by an unwillingness to modify truth to fit it to current conceptions; by an insistence on what seem to many minor points ... it is irritating to men. They would rather discuss than receive truth.”—B.B. Warfield, *The Dogmatic Spirit*²

“Contend for the faith once delivered to the saints!” This line from Jude 3 encapsulates the dictum of the more than 100 years at Princeton Seminary commonly referred to as “Old Princeton.” Such contention, otherwise known as polemic, has not fared well in recent years. Perhaps, as Roger Nicole suggests, this is due to the ecumenical and irenic spirit of the present theological context and seeming failures of polemic in recent memory.³ Regardless of one’s perspective, history affirms that few institutions have ever possessed the pervasive influence of the dogmatic Old Princeton. For this reason such an establishment is worthy of our re-visitation.

Although scholars have long recognized polemic as essential to its theology, little attention has focused on its centrality to the seminary’s beginnings. Princeton’s theology neither emerged nor took shape in a vacuum but in the midst of a particular theological and ecclesiastical climate. The seminary’s fathers found themselves in an historical context that required contention for the survival of the ecclesial and confessional tradition from which they were reared. As Mark Noll so aptly puts, “Princeton resulted from the actions of desperate men, men who thought their society was undergoing a crisis of unprecedented magnitude requiring nothing less than unprecedented solutions.”⁴ In short, polemic is not a chapter in Princeton Seminary’s history but the entire story. Old Princeton Seminary found its conception, birth, rearing, and ultimately its demise in polemic. It is the purpose of this paper to reconstruct the events leading up to the founding of Princeton Seminary to demonstrate the centrality of polemic to the conception and inauguration of the institution. We now devote our attention to this by examining authoritative autobiographies/biographies, correspondence, ecclesiastical minutes, and journal entries of key persons.

AMERICAN PRESBYTERIANISM AND ITS OPPONENTS

First and foremost, Princeton Seminary emerged as a Presbyterian Seminary for the Presbyterian Church. To understand its origins, one must recognize this fact. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, American Presbyterians were searching for identity in uncharted territory. While attempting to maintain the creeds, theology, and polity of their European forebears, Presbyterians met great difficulty in appropriating them in an American context. Democratization and independence following the Revolution not only challenged the

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1. Quoted in David Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary: Faith and Learning 1812–1868* (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 292.

2. B.B. Warfield, “The Dogmatic Spirit” *Benjamin B. Warfield: Selected Shorter Writings*. 2 vols (Philipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1973), 663.

3. Roger Nicole, “Polemical Theology—How to Deal with Those Who Differ from Us,” *Standing Forth: Collected Writings of Roger Nicole* (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), 9.

4. Mark Noll, “The Founding of Princeton Seminary” *Westminster Theological Journal* vol.42 no.1 (1979), 85.

traditional authority of government but also traditional creedal and ecclesiastical structures.

Territorial changes further contributed to the Presbyterian challenge. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 enlarged America's borders, and by default, extended the church's mission. This expansion exposed how ill-equipped Presbyterians were to provide fit ministers for the ever growing West. The achievements of Methodists and Baptists in the evangelization of the frontier put further pressure on the cause of the Presbyterians.⁵

The turbulent events surrounding the Presbyterians in the previous century also exposed them to intense scrutiny by competing denominations. By 1801, less than 100 years after its inaugural Presbytery and Synod, the Presbyterian Church had faced its fair share of controversy. In its infancy, the denomination experienced its first major split, reunion, and compromise.⁶ As a result, Presbyterians were the subject of theological and ecumenical attack. This is particularly the case in New England and the Middle States from which the seminary and its founders, Ashbel Green, Samuel Miller and Archibald Alexander emerged.⁷ The need for establishing confessional, dogmatic, and ecumenical boundaries in the face of such opposition appeared urgent for the denomination's identity and survival.

Of the many challenges Presbyterians faced during this time, there were three that posed the greatest threat: Hopkinsianism, Unitarianism and Episcopacy. Samuel Miller Jr. notes the anxiety of the time brought on by these three agents:

The Hopkinsian controversy was assuming new importance among Congregationalists and Presbyterians. Unitarianism was lifting its head ominously in Boston and elsewhere. High Churchism, in its Anglican form, was preparing for a new and vigorous attack upon the distinctive doctrines of the Reformation.⁸

Though Hopkinsianism, or "the New Divinity," had reared its head since the 1750's and 60's in the Congregational Churches of New England, the *Plan of Union* of 1801 intensified its influence upon Presbyterianism. The publication of Samuel Hopkins' *System of Doctrines* established Hopkinsianism as "the first indigenous American system of Calvinist theology."⁹ The *System*, deemed a "record of theological progress," encapsulated the New England Theology as a "synthesis of strict Reformed theology, [and] Edwardsianism" (Conforti, 162). This new theology endeavored to carry Calvinism beyond the "dead" orthodoxy of Westminster and traditional Presbyterianism by challenging distinctions of traditional

Reformed Theology (see Conforti, 159–174). This "rash" and "violent" system, as Ashbel Green called it, considerably alarmed and threatened Presbyterians and, with the establishment of Andover Seminary in 1808, assured its presence for years to come.¹⁰

Unitarianism also confronted the classic pillars of confessional Presbyterians by establishing the supreme authority of reason above that of Scripture, creeds, and confessions. This challenged the credibility of classic doctrines such as the Trinity and the deity of Christ. By the nineteenth century, Unitarianism enjoyed considerable influence particularly in Congregationalism and the divinity schools of the day, especially Harvard, where the old Calvinistic theologies were no longer accepted uncritically. Unitarians challenged classical Reformed doctrines of original sin, predestination as well as the deity of Christ and the necessity of the Atonement.

Perhaps few men of this time were better acquainted with the theological climate of New England and the Middle Colonies than Ashbel Green.¹¹ In 1791, Green endeavored upon a preaching circuit and tour of the colleges in the Northeast in order to acquaint himself with the theological landscape of these regions. Before embarking on his pilgrimage, he imposed upon himself 18 rules of conduct. Five of these rules give us particular insight into his expectation of controversy and his desire to become better equipped in engagement with heterodoxical ideas:

5. For introduction see Mark Noll, *The Old Religion in the New World* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2002).

6. By "compromise" I am referring to the *Plan of Union* (1801) in which the Presbyterian Church aligned itself with the Congregational church in order to reach the western frontier because of the shortage of ministers.

7. Archibald Alexander was not from this area but was a native Virginian. However, it may be argued that the story of Virginia is paradigmatic to the New England and Middle Colonies. Many of the same concerns were evident during Alexander's time in Virginia especially the presence of Episcopacy with the establishment of William and Mary College and the impacts of revivalism. Prior to the founding of the seminary in 1806 Alexander did move to the middle colony of Pennsylvania in the acceptance of a pastoral call in Philadelphia before being called to Princeton in 1812.

8. Samuel Miller Jr. *Life of Samuel Miller* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen and Haffelfinger, 1869), 182.

9. J.A. Conforti, *Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity Movement*. (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 161.

10. Ashbel Green, *The Life of Ashbel Green* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1849), 220.

11. Ashbel Green (1762–1848) A key person in the founding of Princeton Seminary. He was a Presbyterian pastor and professor. He served as President of the College of New Jersey from 1812–1822 where he also studied under John Weatherspoon during his student years.

Rule 2: Let not controversy on religious subjects make me lose my temper, or say anything hastily, harshly, or severely.

Rule 3: Let me not deny any sentiments that I really hold, be the consequences what they may.

Rule 4: Let me, in answering questions or in giving relations, and in everything else, keep vigorously and entirely to the simple truth.

Rule 5: Let me endeavor to suppress pride and vanity

Rule 6: Let me observe characters with all attention. This is a principal object of my journey. Let me try to learn something from everybody I speak to. (Green, 204–205)

During his journey, Green kept a brief journal with reflection upon every person that he met with especial consideration upon the piety and theological persuasions of pastors. The two most common observations of his journal are in reference to Anti-Trinitarian and Hopkinsian persuasions of these pastors.¹² Green consistently concluded that the men he met were pious and that he avoided controversy with them while gaining invaluable insight into the ecclesiastical circumstances in which he found himself. Perhaps his observation of the Association of the Clergy in Boston will give us a good picture of this context. He writes:

As I understand, they are so diverse in their sentiments that they cannot agree on any point in theology. Some are Calvinists, some Universalists, some Arminians, some Arians, and one at least is a Socinian. How absurd it is for men of such jarring opinions to attempt to unite! (Green, 225)

The religious pluralism of this region would certainly play a factor in his later push for a theological seminary. However, as stated above, the Hopkinsianism and the Anti-Trinitarian controversies most concerned him.

A third adversary of Presbyterianism in the early nineteenth century was Episcopacy. In a letter to Ashbel Green on Feb. 11, 1805 the New York Presbyterian Minister Samuel Miller noted this threat:

The Episcopalians of this city have lately begun to employ a language and act a part, which indicate a wish to

get the mastery over every other denomination in the state, and particularly in the city; and their immense wealth will enable them to do much towards the accomplishment of their object. (Miller, 1:190–191)

On March 12, 1805 he wrote again to Green,

Within the last years . . . they have made many publications, in the form of sermons, tracts, and much larger works, in which the high-toned doctrines of Laud and his successors in opinion are exhibited, and most strenuously contended for. We, at first, thought that the state of public opinion was so utterly repugnant to these principles that our true policy was to treat all their exertions with silent contempt. But things have lately occurred of so flagrant and offensive a nature that we have determined at length, to defend our Presbyterian opinions, and to put our people on their guard. (Miller, 1:192)

Episcopacy called into question Presbyterian polity in general and more particularly its liturgy, the legitimacy of the ordination of its officers, and their right to administer the sacraments. In the eyes of high church Episcopacy, the Presbyterian Church lacked apostolic authority and therefore legitimacy. These attacks threatened to undo unprepared ministers and parishioners of the New York Presbyteries and beyond.

In the midst of these great forces against the Presbyterian Church in the New England and Middle States, the need was clear, more *trained* ministers who could defend the creeds, the theology, and the polity of the Presbyterian Church against the threats of the New England Theology, Unitarianism, and Episcopacy. In the minds of Princeton Seminary's founders, this could only be achieved through the establishment of a specifically traditional Presbyterian Seminary. The Congregationalists could rely on Yale, the Anglicans—William and Mary, and the Unitarians—Harvard; but the Presbyterians held no such institution. The College of New Jersey formerly served as a ministerial educational facility for Presbyterians but by the early nineteenth century it was evidently clear that it was no longer able to do so.

THE IMPACTS OF REVIVALISM

One cannot adequately discuss the founding of Princeton Seminary without mention of the impacts of revivalism. It is evident that the seminary's founders viewed certain elements favorably. Ashbel Green's father was converted under George Whitefield; Archibald Alexander was converted under the revival preaching of

12. *Ibid.*, 204–247. See especially 215, 217–220, 222, 223, 224–225, 239–240.

William Graham; and in his later years, Miller owned a cane made of wood from the Log College (a major training facility for revivalistic Presbyterians).

The College of New Jersey (later Princeton University) had been profoundly impacted by revivalism. Its origins, located in the Log College and New Side Presbyterians, played a major role of influence on the early Princetonians. Ashbel Green studied at Princeton and William Graham, who mentored Alexander, did the same. Speaking of Graham's persuasion, in 1843 Alexander wrote: "The influence which he gained over the minds of his pupils (including Alexander), while under his care was unbounded."¹³

The Princetonians adamantly promoted and embodied emphasis of the revivals upon the piety of the heart. The charter of the theological seminary, known as the "Plan," states that the seminary's purpose "is to cultivate both piety and literature in their preparatory course."¹⁴ Yet the men of Princeton recognized the dangers of unguarded enthusiasm which typically followed revivals. The Presbyterian split between the Old and New Side in 1741, resulting from the tensions of revivalism, still loomed in the minds of Presbyterians.

The damaging ecclesial tendencies produced by the revivals also prompted caution in the early Princetonians. The innovation of itinerant preaching and emphasis on emotional experiences undermined the ordinary means of grace distributed by ordained ministers of the gospel. To the alarm of many Presbyterians, this exalted individual religion over church membership and produced skepticism towards ecclesiastical establishments. Division over the degree of support of the revivals amongst clergy also served to discourage lay people from finding importance in a given tradition. This undermined emphasis on distinctive theological education requirements for ministerial candidates.¹⁵

George Marsden suggests that the revivals of the 1730's and 40's are to be viewed as a complete overturning of traditional authority systems.

Up to this point in New England it had been the clergy who, lamenting decline in the mode of the prophet Jeremiah, railed against their unconverted parishioners. Whitefield was suggesting that the tables might be turned. A spiritual people should challenge the authority of insufficiently spiritual clergy. The office by itself carried no authority.¹⁶

This loss of authority structure contributed greatly to the success of Whitefield's revivals in reaching the masses. As we will see, a great concern for the

Presbyterian Church was their inability to reach the Western frontier with trained pastors. Whitefield and his successors found no hindrance in this area for they worked outside of authority structures that demanded thorough training of their clergy. Instead, Whitefield simply went and sent. To this Mark Noll writes:

Older established churches (such as Presbyterians) struggled when they tried to expand to the frontier. But revivalists succeeded, at least in part, because they abandoned establishments, formal educational requirements for ministers, and other habits of European religion. (Noll, *Old Religion*, 54)

This new "evangelical" way of thinking, to the chagrin of the ecclesially minded, prompted "a movement away from formal, outward, and established religion to personal, inward, and heartfelt religion" (Noll, *Old Religion*, 51).

These revivals of the 1740's and succeeding decades influenced the next half century of Presbyterian action. To protect against the negative influence of revivalism, Presbyteries refused to recognize the ordination of those trained at the Log College. In 1789, to guard against theological laxity produced by revivals, the General Assembly assumed the Adopting Act of 1729 which required its ministers to subscribe to the Westminster Standards for ordination.

In 1801, to cultivate the positive influence of the revival, namely its evangelistic zeal, the Presbyterian Church concocted the Plan of Union, a partnership with Congregationalists to reach the West. Initially, this plan was a budding success. This union played a very important role in spreading Presbyterianism across the frontier. In regards to theological purity however, it backfired. The union with the Congregationalists undermined the Adopting Act as Presbyterians fell under

13. *Address Delivered before the Alumni Association of Washington College, Virginia, on Commencement Day, June 29, 1843* (Lexington, VA, 1843), cited in Morton Smith, *Studies in Southern Presbyterian Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1962), 65.

14. Ashbel Green, "Plan of a Theological Seminary" ed. Mark Noll, *The Princeton Theology 1812-1921* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2001), 56.

15. See C.C. Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England, 1740-1800*. (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 1-35. Nathan Hatch in his work *the Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) recognizes this same mentality but attributes it not to the revivals but to the revolution.

16. George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 211.

heavy influence of the New Divinity. The confusion of doctrinal boundaries embedded bitter resentments in the Presbyterian Church which ultimately contributed to division in 1837.

The founding of Princeton Seminary by the General Assembly in 1812 cannot be properly understood apart from these historical circumstances. It must be viewed in light of the negative results of the Awakening as well as the consequences of the Presbyterian response to those perceptions. The early Princetonians were fiercely committed to the promotion and defense of Presbyterian polity and Orthodox theology as found in the Westminster Standards. The origin of the Seminary at Princeton must be understood as a polemical affront against the over-pietistic mindset which challenged ecclesial authority and the importance of Reformed distinctive as fostered by the evangelical revivals of the Tennents, Whitefield, Davenport, etc. This polemic intensified as the next generation of revival preachers emerged at the turn of the century. In the minds of Princeton's would-be-founders, conservative Presbyterians desperately needed a seminary. Ashbel Green, Samuel Miller and Archibald Alexander, though not the first to conceive of the idea, emerged at the helm to inform their fellow presbyters of this need.

JACOB GREEN AND THE IDEA FOR A PRESBYTERIAN SEMINARY

In November 1775, the "tenacious polemicist" Jacob Green,¹⁷ wrote a letter to Joseph Bellamy with a proposed solution for the severe deficiency of gospel ministers. To Green, the problem primarily consisted in the want of an organization capable of producing "proper preachers." Green's proposal focused on the development of an institution specifically devoted to training ministerial candidates. He wrote:

What I could wish for is, that a Number of Ministers, as an associate Body, in Connecticut, & another body here with us, would joyn & hold some proper communion, or

17. Jacob Green (1722–1796) was a Presbyterian minister and the father of Ashbel Green. He was educated at Harvard University and also served for a time as the president of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton).

18. Jacob Green in a letter to Dr. Bellamy published in the article by Mark Noll, "Jacob Green's Proposal for Seminaries" *The Journal of Presbyterian History* Vol.58, 1980, 210–223.

19. *Ibid.*, 219–220. This is a copy of the original transcription of the letter to Bellamy. The strikeout is maintained from the original.

20. David B. Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary: Faith & Learning 1812–1868* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 28.

correspondence; that they should agree in a method to educate & license men for gospel Ministry. Suppose they should agree to license men to preach who had studied two years if qualified as might be expected in that time ... these schools should be chiefly if not wholly for the Ministry, at least for the present.¹⁸

Jacob Green's suggestion emerged from the desire to see unchartered territories reached with the Gospel carried by able preachers. The zeal and successes of the Methodists and the Baptists in this endeavor helped to produce the idea for a seminary but it also surfaced for polemical reasons. Green writes:

For want of proper preachers, strange & dangerous persuasions, sects, & parties prevail: Heathenism, Deism, Arminianism, Episcopacy, Anabaptism &c. abound. The Anabaptists are the most active & successful; & we need not wonder at their success, for people are without other Teachers ... We that are Ministers of Jesus Christ ought to exert ourselves for the good of his Chh. At a time when the harvest is so large, the Labourers so few, & the danger from corrupt teachers¹⁹ errors so great.

The need was clear: the raising up of more polemically trained pastors able to faithfully proclaim the "precious truths of the Gospel" and thwart erroneous teachings. For Green, a solution required an educational institution devoted to such training, yet the American Revolution and the preoccupation of the church with Independence stifled any further exploration into the matter. Green himself seems to have allowed the idea to fall by the wayside after this letter. However, it can properly be deduced that Jacob impressed this need on his young son Ashbel who would, in time, become an advocate of his father's cause.

THE FOUNDING OF A SEMINARY

As early as 1800, Ashbel Green appeared to be continuing the cause of his father by "quietly putting forth the idea of a theological seminary independent of Princeton College."²⁰ However, it took the encouragement of the fiery New York preacher, Samuel Miller, to prompt Green to action in regard to a seminary. Miller, knee deep in the attacks of the Episcopalians, appealed Ashbel Green:

Am I not right in supposing, that, at least, two hundred more ministers might, at this moment, be advantageously employed, within the grounds of the General

Assembly; and that near half that number are imperiously demanded? It appears to me, that we ought, forthwith, either to establish a new theological school, in some central part of our bounds; or direct more of our attention to extend the plan and increase the energy of the Princeton establishment . . . I know difficulties of the most formidable kind will arise. I can think of no person in the United States, who has so good information of the state of the Presbyterian Church as yourself, or who is so capable of devising and putting in motion the plan best adapted to our situation. I hope, therefore, you will devote your leisure time between this and the meeting of the Assembly to the consideration of the subject, and the preparation of some plan to be acted upon by then. (Miller, 1:192)

He wrote to Green again on May 13, 1805 clearly expressing defensive need for such action to be taken:

[The Episcopalians are attempting] to impress upon the minds of the people a belief of the invalidity of all ministrations, excepting those of men who are episcopally ordained . . . ought not every Presbyterian minister in the United States, to be apprized of these designs and exertions? And ought not the subject of church government generally, and especially the controversy respecting Presbyterian ordination, to be more attended to and better understood, than it commonly is among our brethren. (Miller, 1:192)

The concerns of Miller, not dissimilar from Jacob Green's concerns, extended from fierce polemical engagement with the Episcopalians of New York, a battle which escalated to such an extent that Miller published an exhaustive rebuttal against them entitled *Letters Concerning the Constitution and Order of the Christian Ministry* in 1807.

Dr. Miller's correspondence continued not only with Ashbel Green but also with another member of the Assembly, a certain Dr. Griffin, expressing again the anxieties of the lack of ministers and the need for polemical training against Episcopacy (Miller, 1:193–194). Dr. Miller appealed once more to Dr. Green prior to the meeting of General Assembly in May 1805, compelling Green to send an overture to that body, "which was spread at large upon the minutes, laid over for consideration at the next meeting, and recommended to the particular attention, meanwhile of the Presbyteries" (Miller, 1:195). Though it made no mention of a seminary, Green's overture demanded, "give us ministers" of sound learning, the possession of which is

"indispensable to the acceptance, influence, and the success of [the church's] public teachers."²¹ Accepting the counsel of the Assembly, the New York State Presbytery appointed a committee, which directly appointed Samuel Miller, to consider the topic of theological training.

In 1806, the General Assembly called Dr. Miller to act as its moderator at which time he recommended the adoption of the plans of Green's overture. Though little action was taken, the minutes indicate that the Assembly encouraged the theological education of prospective candidates. The Presbytery issued responsibility of sufficient training predominantly to parents and only called upon the Presbytery to make an annual report with consideration and evaluation of the assembly's duty (Miller, 1:200–201).

By the end of 1806 and into 1807 Samuel Miller grew distracted from the promotion of a Seminary by intensified engagement with the Episcopalians. His time consisted primarily in his pastoral work and his *Letters* in defense of Presbyterianism against High Churchism. In 1808, his battle for a seminary reemerged with the establishment of Andover Seminary by New Side Presbyterians.

In response to this major event, Archibald Alexander, a Philadelphia pastor, preached before General Assembly in 1808 calling for attention towards "the introduction of suitable men into the ministry." He continued, "If you would have a well-disciplined army, you must begin by appointing good officers" (Alexander, 314–315). Alexander beckoned for the production of soldiers, men equipped for *battle* against those who pose danger to "evangelical truth which will now arise from . . . *rational Christianity*, and *enthusiasm*."²² Alexander identified representatives of rational Christianity as Socinians or Unitarians and the enthusiasts as those akin to superstition which tended to move away from truth, most assuredly excessive revivalists. Alexander called for the equipping of men able to serve as "watchmen," to "keep a watchful eye; and against them (erroneous opponents) . . . make a firm and faithful stand" (Alexander, *Assembly Sermon*, 53).

Inspired by Alexander's sermon, Ashbel Green once again turned his attention to the founding of a seminary. He later wrote:

Encouraged by this (Alexander's speech), I used all my influence in favour of the measure; and in 1809, the

21. Quoted in Mark Noll, *Princeton and the Republic* (Princeton University Press, 1989), 171.

22. "Archibald Alexander's General Assembly Sermon" *The Princeton Theology 1812–1921* edited by Mark Noll, 52–54.

Presbytery of Philadelphia, to which I belonged, sent into the General Assembly of that year an overture distinctly proposing the establishment of a theological school. (Alexander, 135)

The Assembly then commissioned Green, Archibald Alexander, and Samuel Miller to formulate a plan for the seminary to propose to the courts of the church. Green presented the finished product at Princeton in 1810 and then to the General Assembly in 1811. The Assembly received it favorably with only slight modifications (Alexander, 317).

The “Plan” declared the purpose of the seminary to be twofold: first, to equip the ministerial candidate “to become a defender of the Christian faith;” and secondly, to defend the “confessions, catechisms and polity of the Presbyterian church.”²³ In other words, students upon graduation must be able to protect the church from heresy (such as the deistical controversies) and to defend orthodoxy as found in the Westminster Standards. At the General Assembly of 1812, a majority vote determined the location of the seminary at Princeton, New Jersey and elected its board of directors (to which Ashbel Green was appointed) and its first professor. On August 12, 1812, Archibald Alexander was inaugurated as professor of didactic and polemical theology at the seminary at Princeton. His first engagement in active polemic began at this moment as he recited the vows which the “Plan” required of all its professors:

In the presence of God and the Directors of this Seminary, I do solemnly, and *ex animo* adopt, receive, and subscribe the Confession of Faith, and Catechisms of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, as the confession of my faith; or as a summary and just exhibition of that system of doctrine and religious belief which is contained in Holy Scripture, and therein revealed by God to man for his salvation; and I do solemnly, *ex animo* profess to receive the Form of Government of said Church, as agreeable to the inspired oracles. And I do solemnly promise and engage, not to inculcate, teach, or insinuate anything which shall appear to me to contradict or contravene, either directly or impliedly, anything taught in the said Confession of Faith or Catechisms; not to oppose any of the fundamental principles

of Presbyterian Church Government, while I shall continue a Professor in this Seminary. (Miller, 1:356–357)

In requiring these vows, the “Plan” openly engaged the major adversaries which had prompted the decision to form the seminary. It insured that no Presbyterian with Hopkinsian proclivities would be sworn into such a position. These vows were viewed as entirely too strict for anyone with such sympathies.²⁴ It also served to ostracize Unitarians. Certainly those who held the supremacy of reason and the rejection of creedal authority could never have complied with this requirement. The Plan, by forcing submission to the authority of creeds and Presbyterian polity, also fortified the seminary from “impulsion” and “enthusiasm” encouraged by revivalism. Lastly, Episcopalians, who possessed different creedal authorities, could not be hired under this subscription requirement. Princeton Seminary had officially begun its polemical reign.

THE BEGINNING OF PRINCETON SEMINARY

With the inauguration of the institution in the fall of 1812, the “Plan” now required implementation. The seminary’s first professor would be vital to the execution of that task and the man called to do this was the reverend Archibald Alexander. Though he viewed himself as the most unworthy of candidates, Alexander proved to be the ideal shaper of Princeton’s polemic approach. According to his biographer, “theology had indeed been the study of his life,” as he had spent an entire career preaching and teaching (Alexander, 353). He had been a student of both Greek and Latin Fathers, the medieval theologians, the Reformed writings, the scholastics and modern theology. He had spent much time reading “the best works in defence of popery; the argumentative dissertations of the extreme Lutherans and Dutch Remonstrants, as well as the Fratres Poloni and other champions of Socinianism” (Alexander, 354–355). During his travels and pastoral ministry he had become thoroughly familiar with English theology, Episcopacy and Hopkinsianism, at one time even preaching in Samuel Hopkins’ pulpit. He was also learned in Greek, Latin and Hebrew. In short, Alexander had been equipped in historical, exegetical, and theological study better than anyone could hope in the seminary’s first professor. This learnedness thoroughly equipped him as instructor of polemics.

Alexander also proved himself to be worthy of this task by his past experience. As a pastor, Alexander had not been estranged to higher education. After being licensed

23. “Plan of a Theological Seminary” produced in Noll, *The Princeton Theology*, 57.

24. *Life of Miller*, 2:25, “The formula of subscription ... as prescribed for professors in the Theological Seminary, had been, from the first, [viewed] as too stringent ... [and] distasteful to those called Hopkinsians in the Presbyterian Church.”

in Hampden-Sidney Virginia in 1791, he served as a missionary preacher until he was named the President of Hampden-Sidney College, a position which he held from 1794 to 1806. From this experience, it is certain that Alexander had the knowledge and the know-how to organize the curriculum of the seminary (Smith, 69).

The “Plan” divided curriculum of the seminary into two essential departments, didactic and polemic theology. The Assembly charged Alexander to devote his attention to teaching sound doctrine and then defending that doctrine against objections of erroneous systems inconsistent with Calvinism. J.W. Alexander writes:

[T]he Plan of the institution made [didactic and polemic theology] imperative, gave the professor an opportunity to go over all the leading doctrines in the way of defence against the objections of errorists, heretics and infidels. In doing this he brought to bear his remarkable stores of recondite reading. He gave the biography of eminent opponents, clear analyses of their systems, and refutation of their reasons. Of necessity he was thus carried into the field of *Dogmengeschichte*, the progress of controversies, the debates and conclusions of councils, the construction of creeds, and the whole round of symbolical theology. What might be considered by some an inordinate length of time was devoted to the cardinal differences, such as the controversy with Deists, Arians, Socinians, Pelagians, Arminians, Papists and Universalists; all being made to revolve around the Calvinistic system, which, upon sincere conviction, he had adopted. (Alexander, 371)

Though considerable attention will be paid to Alexander’s classroom approach and the methodology elsewhere, it is sufficient to notice the centrality of argumentative theology to the seminary’s curriculum.

Princeton’s polemical emphasis is further demonstrated in the selection of Francis Turretin’s *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* as the primary theological textbook. “Because it is an “elenctic” or disputative system, the *Institutes* endeavor to establish right doctrine by way of the refutation of error.”²⁵ Francis Turretin in many ways embodies the polemic methodology which the Princetonians attempted to model. This methodology, in its simplest form, consists of a vast familiarity with one’s opponents. Of this familiarity R.N. Frost writes of Turretin: “His knowledge of Roman Catholic, Arminian, and Socinian theology (as well as patristic and medieval sources) was encyclopedic, supporting his purpose to challenge in polemical—*elenctic*—fashion the opponents of Reformed doctrine.”²⁶

Secondly, with a vast knowledge of one’s opponents a counter - and more orthodox - theology can be established. In other words, Turretin’s (and therefore Alexander’s) approach to Theology was to prove orthodoxy by disproving heterodoxy. In Turretin’s words, the purpose of his *Institutes* was the revealing of *proton pseudos* (“principal falsehoods”) and the resolution of principle objections against the Calvinist system.²⁷ Alexander saw himself as embodying the same responsibility.

In its first semester, the seminary had an incoming class of only three students but by the spring four more had enrolled. The Presbytery never intended for Alexander to carry out the “Plan” of the Seminary alone and by the close of 1812 the necessity of a second faculty member had become apparent. In 1813, the General Assembly named Samuel Miller *Professor of Ecclesiastical History and Church Government*. He had served the Presbyterian Church in New York since 1793 and as an established preacher, historian, and ecclesiastical authority he possessed full qualification. Though he formerly enjoyed literary prestige and fame, as a result of the production of a celebrated historical work on the history of New York in the 18th century, he now turned to a life of serious theological devotion. With the death of his brother in 1812, Samuel Miller became the last male member of his immediate family. This resolved in him a degree of earnestness which prior to this he had not known and now carried with him to Princeton.²⁸ This weightiness is expressed in a journal entry marked March 17, 1812:

I am the only surviving son of seven born to my parents. One sister and myself are all that remain of nine children. Solemn situation! When shall I be called to give an account of my stewardship? Lord God, thou knowest. Oh prepare me for all thy will. (Miller, 1:326)

Prior to his hiring in 1813, Samuel Miller had developed a reputation as a staunch defender of the Presbyterian cause and fierce polemicist. Miller had found consistent polemic engagement with Episcopacy since 1805 culminating in the well received publication of his

25. Richard Muller, “A Review of the *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*: V1: 1st–10th Topics,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993), 520–522.

26. R.N. Frost, “A Review of the *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*,” *Journal of Evangelical Society* 44 (2001), 362–364.

27. Francis Turretin, *The Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Philipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1: xxxix.

28. For a very interesting article on this topic see Belden C. Lane, “Miller and the Eldership: A Knickerbocker Goes to Nassau” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 4 (1985), 211–224.

Letters in 1807. He also participated in the Hopkinsian controversies particularly in the Gardner Spring Settlement of 1810. In this instance, Miller arose to the defense of Spring and the Hopkinsianism to which Spring held sympathies.²⁹ Interestingly, for a number of years Miller himself tolerated Hopkinsianism and perhaps even embraced some of its teachings. This seems to have decisively changed by 1817 when Miller struck at the Hopkinsians for their direct attack of the Seminary (Miller, 2:227).³⁰

In the Hopkinsian controversy of 1811, it is reported that Miller encouraged his fellow presbyters to tolerate the exotic system and with the optimism that harmful aspects would eventually pass. In light of this instruction Lefferts Loetscher comments in unflattering terms that: "Miller showed a strange lifelong tendency to fluctuate between the extremes of generous conciliation and impatient controversy."³¹ Evidence however demonstrates to the contrary that from these episodes, as well as involvement with the Unitarian controversies in 1805 and 1810, he had developed a reputation as a seasoned polemicist (Miller, 1:291).

There appears to be significant motivation for hiring Samuel Miller as Princeton Seminary's second professor. In Miller, the General Assembly employed a polemicist: one with credibility, ability, and earnest devotion to the Presbyterian cause. At this point in history, perhaps no better advocate of American Presbyterianism existed. A summary of Miller's contribution to the faculty can be read in the following lines from the biography of Dr. Alexander:

Dr. Miller brought with him a high reputation as a preacher, an author, and a Christian gentleman. He was about three years older than his colleague, being

accordingly in his prime of mental and bodily vigour. His name was widely known from his "Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century," and more recently from his defence of presbytery against the attacks of Doctors Hobart and Bowden (two high church Episcopalians). (Miller, 2:15)

Upon receiving the call of the General Assembly, Dr. Miller expressed in his inaugural address on September 29, 1813 the weightiness of this task to which he had been beckoned:

To this office I was elected by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, in the month of May last. I thought I had then, and at different periods since, some impression of the deep importance and awful weight of this undertaking. But to-day I could not help *trembling* under a sense of its unspeakable solemnity! (Miller, 1:356)

On this same date, Miller began his polemical activity in his inaugural discourse entitled, *Witness for the Truth during the Dark Ages*. Here we read the words of an historian in his new post defending Trinitarian theology and opposing conflicting formulations. This speech would foreshadow a large part of his tenure at the seminary.

With the seminary's first two professors now in place, a polemical foundation had truly been laid in Nassau Hall. Yet the "Plan" called for three faculty members and indeed it was the hiring of the third, nearly a decade later, which established Princeton's theological foundation for the remainder of the nineteenth century. This will be taken up again at another place.

CONCLUSION

To this point we have attempted to demonstrate the centrality of polemic to Princeton Seminary's origins. If this task has been achieved successfully, pause for reflection is warranted. It is our conclusion that not only is this story not unique but that it is paradigmatic of the formation of seminaries in succeeding generations. Subsequent institutions likewise found their birth in the desire to rescue a denomination from a lack or loss of denominational distinctive, theological laxity, and the defense against competing ecclesiastical establishments. Westminster Seminary and Reformed Theological Seminary offer us modern examples of this fact.³² The challenge which virtually every theological

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29. In a letter to Gardner Spring Miller reportedly wrote, "I should hesitate to *lay hands* on Dr. Emmons; but though I do not approve of all that Dr. Hopkins has written, I would ordain any man, otherwise qualified, who could honestly say, that he believed *every word* of Dr. Hopkins' system". See Samuel Miller Jr. *Life of Samuel Miller* 1:301, 304.

30. See Samuel J. Baird, *A History of the New School and of the Questions Involved in the Disruption* (Claxton, Remsen, & Haffelfinger, 1868), 247.

31. Lefferts Loetscher, *Facing the Enlightenment and Pietism: Archibald Alexander and the Founding of Princeton Theological Seminary* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1983), 133.

32. For the founding of Westminster Seminary see Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1954) or David Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary: The Majestic Testimony* Vol.2, 2vols. (Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 1996). For RTS you can see John Muether, *The First Forty Years: 1966–2006*, published by Reformed Theological Seminary, 2006.