

The Ministerial Shortage Problem in Presbyterian History & George Howe's Appeal for More Ministers

By Barry Waugh, Ph.D.

One of the issues faced by this nation's Presbyterian Church has been a reoccurring and almost ceaseless shortage of ministers. It seems that, "The harvest is great, but the laborers are few (Matt. 9:37)," has been a refrain for each generation of Presbyterians. One seminary professor who joined in the chorus was George Howe. Dr. Howe may be an unfamiliar name to many readers of this article but to South Carolinians he is best known for his meticulously researched two volume history of the Presbyterian Church in South Carolina.¹ A survey of the publications produced by him shows that his interests included not only Presbyterian history, but race and slavery, theological education, women, preaching, and Old Testament studies including the genuineness of the Pentateuch. In order to acquaint the reader with the history of the ministerial shortage problem and Dr. Howe's concerned involvement with the issue, this article will present a survey of the shortage of ministers in the history of American Presbyterianism up to the time of Dr. Howe's discourse in 1836, some reference to the shortage after his discourse, a brief biography of his long life, and a transcription of his discourse, *An Appeal to the Young Men of the Presbyterian Church in the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia*.

The earliest extant records of American Presbyterianism illustrate the perpetual problem of ministerial shortages. In May 1709, the year following the death of the missionary and father of American Presbyterianism, Francis Makemie,² a letter from the presbytery was sent to Sir Edmund Harrison, London, seeking "200 lb p Annu: ... for the Encouragement of Ministers in these parts."³ The letter comments further that the funds were needed to finance the addition of two or three ministers to the seven clergy that constituted the ministers of the Presbytery. The solicitation articulated the hope that seven or eight new congregations could be established with some financial assistance (Klett, 1709, 73).

The seriousness of the situation was such that, "the Desires of sundry places [are] crying unto us for Ministers to deal forth the word of Life unto them" (Klett, 1709, 73). By 1718, the year after the first synod was founded, there were twenty-three ministers and three "Probationers," but despite the increase in the number of clergy there were "still many Vacancies" (Klett, 1718, 90). Whether Harrison contributed to this need is not related in the minutes, but the Synod continued to grow by adding new churches despite a limited number of clergy to serve its congregations. Notwithstanding the shortage of preachers, the synod reminded its congregations that all ministers needed to be thoroughly examined when entering a presbytery and those coming from "the north of Ireland," no matter how well "certified," could not be made exceptions to the rule. These foreign ministers could not be installed pastors in a church until they preached before presbytery, served a six month

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1. *History of the Presbyterian Church in South Carolina*. By George Howe, D.D., Professor in the Theological Seminary, Columbia, South Carolina. Prepared by Order of the Synod of South Carolina, 2 vols., (vol. 1, Columbia: Duffie & Chapman, 1870, vol. 2, Columbia: W. J. Duffie, 1883); the two volumes were reprinted by the Synod of South Carolina of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, vol. 1, 1965 and vol. 2, 1966; unfortunately, the first edition and the reprint are both hard to find and often expensive when located.

2. [Ed. See D. G. Hart's "Francis Makemie and the Meaning of American Presbyterianism," *CPJ* 2 (2006) 17-78.]

3. Guy S. Klett, ed., *Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1706-1788* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1976) 1709, 73 [1709 is the year of the minutes, and 73 is the page number in the Klett minutes]; this book is invaluable for studying Presbyterian history before the first meeting of the General Assembly in 1789; approval of the letter by the Presbytery is on page 7, and page 73 provides a transcription of its contents.

probationary period within that presbytery, and then been finally approved by that presbytery (Klett, 1735, 132). The desire to faithfully maintain the purity and peace of the Presbyterian Church grew out of the synod's general difficulties with some of the foreign clergy who had transferred to the colonies. One particular case illustrating the problem was that of Samuel Hemphill, who immigrated to the colonies from the Presbytery of Straban, Ireland and became the subject of the first heresy trial in American Presbyterian history. He was admitted to the synod and "recommended to the Regards and Assistance of which so ever of our Presbry's his Abode shall be fixed among" (Klett, 1734, 121). But by 1735, Hemphill was found to be in error, and his deviation was exacerbated by his contemptuous and disrespectful behavior towards the Synod of Philadelphia. The judicatory "found him unqualified for any future Exercise of his Ministry within our Bounds."⁴ The shortage of ministers for Colonial Presbyterian congregations was at least partially due to the denomination's just concern to have educated ministers who were committed to the Westminster Standards; more ministers could be found if the academic and theological standards were reduced, but the concern for the spiritual well being of the congregants trumped diluted standards. The tension between filling the vacant pulpits and maintaining educational rigor would continue to contribute to the shortage of clergy.⁵

When the Synod of New York, the New Side, met in "Elisabeth-Town . . . New-Jersie" in September of 1745, its commissioners came from the Presbyteries of New York, New Brunswick, and New-Castle (Klett, 1745, 263). Their separation from the Synod of Philadelphia was a result of differences over the Great Awakening, support

of ministerial education at the Tennents' "Log College," and contributing to these two issues was the definition of subscription to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. As the short existence of the Synod of New York—separated from the Synod of Philadelphia, 1745–1758—developed, it dealt with petitions for supplies, a charlatan minister, itinerant preachers, and a severe ministerial shortage in both North and South Carolinas, and to a lesser degree in some other colonies (Klett, 1751, 277; 1752, 281; 1755, 297, 310). By the time the New Side Synod of New York came to its end in 1758, it still faced ministerial shortages. The minutes comment that:

The great Number of Vacancies in the Bounds of this Synod is owing—partly to the new settlements lately made in various Parts of this Continent—partly to the Death of Sundry Ministers belonging, to this Synod—But principally to the *Small Number of Youth educated for the ministry*, so vastly disproportionate to the Numerous vacancies: and unless Some effectual Measures can be taken for the Education of proper Persons for the sacred Character, the Churches of Christ in these Parts must continue in the most destitute Circumstances, wandering Shepardless & forlorn, thro this Wilderness, Thousands perishing for lack of Knowledge, the Children of God hungry & unfed, & the rising Age growing up in a State little better than that of Heathenism, with Regard to the publick Ministrations of the Gospel (Klett, 1758, 328; italics added for emphasis).

The minutes go on to mention that the best approach to alleviating the need for ministerial training was the maturing and growing College of New Jersey. The presbyters hoped that the Princeton successor to the Tennents' college in Neshaminy, though still a young institution, would provide "a sufficient Supply when brought to maturity."⁶ Despite the efforts of the New Side Presbyterians to alleviate its ministerial shortage by establishing its college in the hamlet of Princeton, its efforts to centralize and institutionalize its educational program were only partially successful because the shortage of ministers continued.

The Old Side, the Synod of Philadelphia, having been relieved of its New Side influences, continued its parallel ministry in the colonies as it also struggled with a scarcity of qualified pastors. Finding pastors was particularly difficult for the "back Inhabitants" of North Carolina and Virginia, which was evidenced by their repeated requests for supplies to serve their rural and sometimes isolated congregations.⁷ In the case of Virginia, the year was only partially served by two

4. Klett, 1735, 130; on the Hemphill case see, William S. Barker, "The Samuel Hemphill Case (1735) and the Historic Method of Subscribing to the Westminster Standards," in *Word to the World* (Fearn: Mentor Imprint, Christian Focus Publications, 2005) 229–257; see also, Morton H. Smith, "Subscription to the Westminster Standards in the Presbyterian Church in America," *Mid America Journal of Theology* 9 (Spring 1993): 53–56; David W. Hall's, *The Practice of Confessional Subscription* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995), also has some discussion of the Hemphill case as well as the Barker article in another edition (149–169) and Smith's, "The Case for Full Subscription" (185–205).

5. Regarding qualified clergy see, Klett, 1735, 132; 1737, 150; 1743, 184; etc.

6. Klett, 1758, 329; the college founded in Princeton has enjoyed several formal and informal names, College of New Jersey, Princeton College, Nassau Hall, and eventually Princeton University. The college was chartered in 1746 and its first class of six men was graduated in 1748.

7. Klett, 1755, 243; See also: 1744, 197; 1747, 216; 1753, 238; 1756, 249; 1757, 255.

missionaries who were to each minister eight weeks in the remote areas (Klett, 1749, 221). The Old Side's concern for an educated clergy led them to pursue its own educational program at the same time that the New Side was progressing towards the founding of Princeton College. Early on, the Synod of Philadelphia sought the assistance of Yale as expressed in a letter to its president, Thomas Clap (Klett, 1746, 211–214; yes, Yale). The Synod of Philadelphia related to Clap how the Tennents had “set up a school,” the Log College, where some “were educated and afterwards admitted to the Ministry without sufficient Qualifications.” The Old Side expressed its continued desire to establish a college even though it had previously failed in its efforts (Ibid., 211). The appeal to Yale for assistance did not bring any concrete assistance from the New Haven college, and once again, the road to ministerial education found a dead-end and a new route was needed for the Old Side.

Pastoral shortages continued and a committee of the Old Side met to consider a program to educate young men for the purpose of supplying the increasing number of vacancies in the churches. The committee proposed that its synod had to be behind the efforts if success was to follow, so the Synod of Philadelphia agreed to the four point plan that had been recommended by the committee. Firstly, the school had to be open to all people so that their children could be educated “gratis” in the languages, philosophy and divinity; secondly, the congregations must be asked to contribute annually to the school; thirdly, the funds must then be used to support a master and a tutor and any remaining funds should be used to buy books and other “necessaries” for the benefit of the school; and finally, the trustees must audit the school finances and oversee the school master (Klett, 1744, 197, 198). The school, which goes unnamed in the minutes, had a report delivered to the synod meeting the following year (Klett, 1745, 200). By 1748, the synod had to pay the debts of the school and assess the congregations for the funds as well as charge the students for their education (Klett, 1748, 217, 219). The financial debts of the school meant that the Synod of Philadelphia often had to supplement the school or allow the master to charge additional fees to his students (Klett, 1749, 221). By 1753, the committee responsible for overseeing and examining the school reported that they were “well pleased with the proficiency of the Scholars & Care of the Master” (Klett, 1753, 237). The school struggled through the years the Sides were separated, but it also enjoyed some cooperation with German schools, and taught some “Dutch children in the English Tongue gratis” (Klett, 1757, 257). Unfortunately,

the full nature of the Old Side educational program is not clearly presented in the minutes (Klett, 1756, 252; 1757, 255, 256, 258; 1758, 261). Despite teaming with the German schools, the funds for paying the Old Side school's master came up short again in 1757, but the synod agreed to continue the school into the next academic year (Klett, 1757, 258; 1758, 261).

One difficulty faced by present day Presbyterians as they try to understand the ministerial shortage problem in the colonial Presbyterian Church is grasping the immense obstacles facing the church as it tried to provide qualified ministers. Just as the sheep of these congregations lived hard lives, the Presbyterian Church struggled to spread the Gospel in a massive, hostile, and topographically diverse colonial situation. Many churches were located in remote areas, separated by great distances, at the mercy of the elements, animals, and Indians. Financial remunerations for the ministers were often minimal, if at all, and if there was any salary, it was sometimes late-in-coming.⁸ Some pastors served more than one congregation, sometimes three or more, and this multiple service involved considerable danger and travel. The minister would ride to his congregations on a horse, or in some cases walk from one pulpit to the next; the course was arduous and the dangers very often wore-down the best of men. One minister's wife, whose husband was away, was cooking in her log cabin when she heard the family cow's bell ringing faintly as the animal wandered into the surrounding woods. The mother had to remove her pot from the fire, tie her toddler to the bed post so the child would not be harmed by falling into the fire during the bovine retrieval, and go out and find her cow as quickly as possible in order to save the source of dairy goods for her household.⁹ Colonial ministry was not only hazardous for the husband but the wife and children as well, and one might wonder how many ministers abandoned rural churches because their wives had simply had enough. One needs only to wander through old church cemeteries to see how young some of the ministers were that are buried in their grounds. These difficulties contributed not only to

8. A survey of the minutes of the General Assembly, as well as a scan of the minutes of many presbyteries and synods will find ministers making appeals for back-wages. The judicatories often would remind the congregation or congregations that called the minister of the duty to fulfill the financial aspects of a call. Whether the reminders from the courts achieved their ends was not always recorded. It may be in some cases that the beleaguered minister had exhausted his options for back wages and he just gave up.

9. One can imagine that if a mother tied a child to a bed post today to protect the child, she would be criticized for child abuse and the local municipality might be knocking on the door in short order.

arduous ministries, but they made central, institutional education nearly impossible, and many ministers were tutored or mentored with varying degrees of success.

The reunion of the Old and New Sides in 1758 brought the resources of both denominations together for an united educational program. Half of the Old Side's twenty-two ministers were present at the reunion, while the New Side had thirty-one of its seventy-two pastors in attendance.¹⁰ One of the first actions of the reunited church was to ordain John Griffith as an exceptional case because he lacked "School Learning usually requir'd" for ministry, but his ability to speak Welsh was beneficial for a much needed ministry with the Presbyterian "Welch" people (Klett, 1758, 344, 345). For the ensuing years the Synod of New York and Philadelphia repeatedly had to appoint supplies to various churches in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, New York, Pennsylvania, Georgia, and New Jersey (Klett, 1759, 349; 1760, 356, 360; 1761, 369, 371; etc). The states that most often requested either supplies and/or called ministers were Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina, which may have been due to the distance between cities and the rural distribution of most of the population in these states in the eighteenth century.

Shortages continued and in 1767 the Carolinas and Virginia came before the Synod of New York and Philadelphia for help. Seven congregations in the area of what is now Charlotte, North Carolina, approached its synod with the proposal that any one or all of the ministers, "Spencer, Lewis, McWhorter, and James Caldwell," who would accept a call to any one of the congregations for half-time duties and half pay could serve the other half of the time supplying the remaining churches for the balance of the remuneration. Each of these four men was "interrogated" concerning their interest in the call and "each of them returned a Negative answer" (Klett, 1767, 439). Presbyterians faced a considerable shortage because supplies were also sought for "Orange and

Culpepper Counties, the South Branch of Potomack in Virginia, and from the long Canes, Cathys Settlt., Indian Creek and Duncans Creek in North Carolina." But these were not the only congregations in need because more requests for supplies came from "Williamsburg, & Places adjacent. Hanover & Cub Creek in Virginia, Newburn, Edenton, Fourth Creek, upper Hico, Haw River, Goshen, in the forks of Catawba, The South Fork of Catawba, The Forks of Yadkin & Salisbury in N. Carolina ... Little River in South Carolina, and Briar Creek in Georgia" (Klett, 1767, 439). The Synod of New York and Philadelphia faced further difficulties because its efforts were complicated by the different language groups the Presbyterians encountered in their work; ministers were needed to shepherd congregations that spoke Dutch, German, Welsh, and in southeastern North Carolina, Gallic.

Zooming-in from the greater Presbyterian Church in the colonies to the particular situation in South Carolina, the first meeting of the Presbytery of South Carolina convened at the Waxhaws Church, April 12, 1785.¹¹ Two ministers and three probationers were received by transfer from Orange Presbytery (Klett, 1787, 618). Later that year, the new presbytery ordained and installed three ministers to calls within its bounds, but it also lessened its ranks due to having to exercise discipline against one minister that was "cut off" from presbytery "for contumacy" (Ibid.). The report of the South Carolina Presbytery to the General Assembly of 1789 showed eleven ministers and three probationers serving forty-four churches.¹² By 1796 the Presbytery of South Carolina was able to report that it had nineteen ministers and five probationers, but its limited churches and finances contributed to its inability to send commissioners to the general assembly meetings (*Minutes, 1789-1820*, 1796, 112, 107). The next year South Carolina Presbytery had twenty ministers serving thirty-one churches and fifteen vacant pulpits (Ibid., 1797, 120). By 1802, South Carolina Presbytery had grown enough that the single state presbytery was divided into two (Ibid., 1798, 137, 159; 1799, 166, 186; 1800, 210; 1802, 243).

In many areas, educated pastoral oversight of the churches continued to be a problem for the existing churches and the missionary efforts of the denomination. In one case, the minister David Rice proposed in a letter to the General Assembly a reduction in the educational requirements for Presbyterian ministers. Rice labored in Transylvania Presbytery in Kentucky, which had many rural churches much like South Carolina. Though the General Assembly sympathized with Rice's plight in Kentucky, it went on to say that:

10. Klett, Synod of Philadelphia minutes, 1758, 259; Synod of New York and Philadelphia minutes, 1758, 339-340.

11. "South Carolina Presbytery" and "Presbytery of South Carolina" are used interchangeably in this article because the ecclesiastical records do the same. For the purpose of this article the statistics will be taken from the South Carolina Presbytery numbers cited in the general assembly minutes. A helpful resource for studying South Carolina Presbyterianism is a special issue of the *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, vol. 90, combining issues 1 and 2, 1989, titled, "Guide to Presbyterian Ecclesiastical Names and Places in South Carolina 1685-1985," by Joseph B. Martin, III. The section on South Carolina Presbytery is on page 183.

12. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America From its Organization A.D. 1789 to A.D. 1820 Inclusive* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, [1847]) 20.

... were our opinion on this subject different from what it is, we cannot lawfully and conscientiously depart from our present standards, till they be changed in an orderly manner, by the consent of a majority of the Presbyteries which compose the body of the General Assembly (*Minutes, 1789–1820, 1804, 300*).

And further that:

If men are sincerely desirous of promoting the glory of God, let them first bestow the necessary pains and time to acquire the requisite qualifications for feeding and leading the flock of Christ; let them be regularly initiated into the priesthood, and not hasten to offer unhallowed fire on God's altar. If they are sincerely desirous of doing good, then do it in that sphere in which they appear destined by providence to move (*Ibid., 300, 301*).

As the supreme judicatory affirmed the importance of a well educated clergy, it went on to allow for "assistants" like the "helpers or catechists of the primitive church" (*Minutes, 1789–1820, 301*). These aides to ministers, counseled the General Assembly, had to be under proper restrictions, fully supervised, and their teaching had to be limited to the young. The General Assembly advised its presbytery that great caution must be used if a presbytery finds itself needing such minimally educated help because youthful zeal may lead to pride and error (*Ibid.*). The Presbyterian Church found itself often short on clergy, but at least till 1804, the denomination held to its standards and required qualified ministers to be well educated ministers with the caveat that they could use catechists for training the young.

Ashbel Green, who had been encouraged by correspondence with Samuel Miller concerning the ministerial shortage and the need for clergy education, stated in a letter to the 1805 meeting of the General Assembly that, "Give us ministers," was the cry of the missionary fields and the many vacancies in the denomination, and that empty pulpits were not only a problem for the rural small congregations but the larger urban churches as well.¹³ Expressing the sentiments of some in the church, he commented further that, "if the number of our clergy were doubled, it would not exceed the demand which exists for their labours, provided they should be well furnished for their work."¹⁴ Green's analysis of the situation deduced two particular problems that had to be resolved. The first problem involved adequate financial remuneration for the ministry, that is, "they who preach the gospel should live of the gospel." The second difficulty was the need for the

presbyteries to be more vigilant in seeking young men to enter the ministry and then provide them with an education (*Minutes, 1789–1820, 1805, 342, 343*). With regard to the education of these youth, Green called for the funds to be supplied through the congregations, presbyteries, the young men's own efforts, and the gifts of wealthy Christians (*Ibid., 343*). But where David Rice had called for a relaxation of the educational requirements, Green reaffirmed the continued importance of well educated ministers, called for better oversight of candidates, and encouraged more liberal giving of funds to support the educational needs of young ministerial students. This letter from Green may have been an early influence on the presbyters and stimulated their thinking about establishing a denominational seminary, which would be fulfilled in 1812 when the Theological Seminary at Princeton was founded.

As the nation progressed through the first decade of the nineteenth century, the work of the Presbyterians in South Carolina continued to reduce its ministerial shortage. The First and Second South Carolina presbyteries reported a total of twenty-five ministers and fifty-four churches in their bounds in 1808, eighteen ministers and forty-eight churches in 1810, and by the following year these two presbyteries were united into the South Carolina Presbytery with nine ministers and twenty-five churches.¹⁵ The Synod of South Carolina and Georgia was formed in 1913 and it included the presbyteries of South Carolina, Hopewell, and Harmony (*Minutes, 1789–1820, 1813, 527*). The following year the South Carolina Presbytery reported ten ministers and twenty-five churches, and then the statistics for the next year gave a more dismal minister-to-church ratio of nine ministers and twenty-seven churches (*Minutes, 1789–1820, 1814, 575*). From 1815 through 1820, the ratio of ministers to churches was about one third.¹⁶

The pattern of ministerial shortage continued for the

13. *Minutes, 1789–1820, 1805, 341–343*; Green's letter occupies most of page 341 and all of pages 342 and 343; the Samuel Miller influence is mentioned by R. A. Harrison in his, *Princetonians 1776–1783: A Biographical Dictionary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981) 409.

14. *Minutes, 1789–1820, 1805, 341*; "well furnished," that is, qualified and well educated.

15. *Minutes, 1789–1820, 1808, 410; 1810, 460; 1811, 488*; the number of South Carolina presbyteries has varied. The variation in the judicatories reflects the variation in the effectiveness of the Presbyterians in the state as well as their work in the face of growing Baptist and Methodist efforts.

16. *Minutes, 1789–1820, 1815, 603; 1816, 635*; there was no report to the General Assembly in 1817, 668; 1818, 696; 1819, 719; 1820, 743.

years leading up to Dr. Howe's delivery of his *Appeal* in 1836. The average ratio of ministers to churches in South Carolina Presbytery was thirteen ministers for thirty-two churches if the year 1835 is excluded because of the failure of the synod to send-up its reports to the Assembly. Only twelve ministers served thirty-five churches in 1828, which was the worst report, while the 1822 statistics gave the best figures for the period with fifteen ministers serving twenty-five congregations.¹⁷ During the same fifteen year period, the General Assembly continued its practice of maintaining high educational requirements for its ministers when in 1826 it approved a change to the *Form of Government*, 14:6, which would raise the minimum period of ministerial divinity training from two to three years. When the committee handling the revision presented its report it said that:

It is believed by the committee, that since the formation of the constitution of the Presbyterian church in the year 1788, a change has taken place in the state of the church and society in our country at large, which may render proper a change in the period during which candidates for the gospel ministry should be required to study, previously to their licensure to preach the gospel. Candidates for the gospel ministry now are in general younger than such candidates for the gospel ministry were 30 years ago; there are more facilities for education; and the diffusion of knowledge and increase of mental improvement, seem to demand a correspondent increase of ministerial furniture, in those who preach the gospel. For these reasons the committee submit that in their apprehension the article of the constitution which directs, that the period of two years of previous study shall be indispensable to license, may advantageously be increased to the period of three years, except in extraordinary cases (*Minutes, 1821-1835*, 1826, 190).

Since this change involved a constitutional document, it had to be sent down to the presbyteries for approval. When the votes from the presbyteries were counted

17. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America from A.D. 1821 to A.D. 1835 Inclusive* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Education, n.d.), 1821, 4 (13 ministers, 30 churches); 1822, 65 (15 ministers, 25 churches); 1823, 95 (14, 31); 1824, 127 (15, 34); 1825, 160 (16, 34); 1826, 193 (15, 35); 1827, 223 (15, 35); 1828, 250 (12, 35); 1829, 277 (11, 32) [the actual number of ministers listed in 1829 was "1," but it is believed that this was an error since the 1828 number was 12 and the 1830 count was 11]; 1830, 311 (11, 29); 1831, 348 (13, 29); 1832, 384 (13, 29); 1833, 417 (15, 32); 1834, 460 (14, 35); 1835, 492 (no report).

18. Charles Hodge, "Are there too many Ministers?" *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 34 (January): 133-146.

the following year the change was defeated (*Minutes, 1821-1835*, 1827, 218). So, despite the continued efforts to provide a well educated clergy, the fairly tight vote—37 against and 30 for—indicates that there were still divisions over how much education was sufficient.

This brings the survey of the history of the ministerial shortage problem in the Presbyterian Church to the time of George Howe's discourse before the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia, but in the interest of showing where the issue stood following the Civil War, two additional items will be considered. The first item is an article titled, "Are there too many Ministers?," by Charles Hodge, and the second item is a consideration of the ministerial shortage problem at the 1865 General Assembly of what became the Presbyterian Church in the United States. The 1865 meeting of the PCUS General Assembly is particularly relevant because George Howe was its moderator and his experience as a seminary professor and presbyter could identify with the plight of the southern Presbyterians following the end of the war.

In 1862, in response to ideas floating around in the General Assembly meeting, Charles Hodge published an article in the *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*, titled, "Are there too many Ministers?"¹⁸ This might seem an odd question, which is exactly how Dr. Hodge approached it when he commented, "Until recently this question would have sounded strangely in the ears of Presbyterians" (Hodge, 133). He commented further, "Since when has the harvest ceased to be great, and the labourers few" (Ibid.)? He observed that those in the PCUSA who said there were too many ministers had a sadly mistaken notion of the uniqueness of the church and its ministry. The church is not the military—just because the military stops recruiting because it has enough soldiers does not mean the church stops because it *thinks* it has too many ministers (Hodge, 134). Complaining that there are too many ministers is essentially accusing the Holy Spirit of incompetence and denies divine providence. The church does not call ministers, the Holy Spirit calls ministers, and so if there are too many ministers, the third person of the Trinity is in error (Hodge, 135, 137). Hodge goes on to admit that those who say there are too many ministers are correct when they say that some clergy should not have been ordained because they did not have the gifts needed. Hodge adds further that the church did not do an adequate job of assessing their gifts and calling, but the errors of presbyteries do not negate the duty of the courts to discern those who *are* called and see that they have opportunity to serve (Hodge, 137-138). Three-hundred ministers were without call in the PCUSA in

1862, and this seeded the idea of there being too many clergy, but Hodge notes that the lack of a call could be due to many vacant pulpits being unable to financially support a minister. The Princetonian contended that it is the church's duty to see that those without a call be given the opportunity to exercise their God-given gifts (Hodge, 138–139). To support his case he turned to the General Assembly minutes of 1861 and found that there were nine hundred seventeen more churches than ministers in the denomination, which led him to the obvious conclusion that it is preposterous to think there could be too many ministers (Hodge, 140). What is more, he turned to the greater ministry of the Presbyterian Church and the work of world missions and noted that those ministers without-call could be given calls, but once again the problem of adequate support and the need for the generosity of the church limited putting all those ministers to work (Hodge, 141). Dr. Hodge may not be known for his compassion for the poor, but in this article he contends that the Presbyterian Church could have put some of those ministers to work by having them preach to the economically deprived and that the denomination should help fund such ministries (Hodge, 142–143). The final pages reiterate the accusation that the reason it *appears* there are too many ministers is because the church does an inadequate job of finding calls for its ministers, which is then aggravated by the limited funds available to the denomination for the poor and missionary efforts due to the stinginess of the church's members (Hodge, 142–146). Dr. Hodge's concluding comment sums it up:

Let those who feel for unemployed ministers not raise the standard of rebellion against God, nor reject the proffered gifts of the Spirit, nor strive to impede the progress of the church, but devote their energy to enable her to carry into effect the ordinance of Christ, that they who preach the gospel shall live by the gospel. Then, should we have too many ministers, the proper remedy will be the deposition of those who refuse to work, and not arresting the increase of faithful labourers (Hodge, 146).

Though George Howe was on the opposite side of the Blue-Gray line at this time, one would think that he would agree with his Princeton colleague's assessment of the absurdity of there being too many ministers, as a matter of fact, he would have been glad to have been in a situation requiring the writing of a similar article in 1836 instead of having to plead for ministers for the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia.

With the end of the Civil War, the Southern Presbyterian Church, formerly the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America, met in Macon, Georgia. The 1865 meeting was moderated by George Howe and there were several significant items docketed. The commissioners needed to change the denomination's name, which was resolved by a substantial vote in favor of the "Presbyterian Church in the United States," but more importantly for the present study, there was an appeal for ministers. The report of one committee stated that there is an "increasing need of ministers of the Gospel to enter upon the labors of our vast field." Due to the war, the shortage was particularly severe because of the dead and critically wounded men lost in the conflict, which prior to the war had been in training for the ministry. This was further complicated by the economic and social chaos in the Confederate states at some points during the conflict, which made it impossible for seminary classes to be conducted regularly and in consistent locations. Essentially, there was a four year void in the history of ministerial preparation for the Presbyterians of the South.¹⁹ The report continued by noting that the severe post-war poverty of the masses made it nearly impossible for candidates to raise funds for their education (*Minutes P.C.U.S.*, 367). Despite the severe ministerial shortage, the General Assembly reminded its members that the:

Presbyteries should relax none of their vigilance in selecting those upon whom the charities of the church are to be bestowed. Let them be very careful on this particular point. The experience of the past shows the necessity for double vigilance here. One unworthy subject receiving aid from the funds of the church may do an injury to the cause that scores of worthy recipients will not be able to repair (*Minutes P.C.U.S.*, 367).

The final paragraph of the report called for the raising up of ministerial candidates, and it encouraged the churches to, "Pray ye the Lord of the Harvest, that He would send forth laborers into His harvest" (Ibid.). To reinforce this call for laborers, the judicatory appointed the last Thursday in February to be "observed in special prayer," and the Sabbath before that day would be "a day of special instruction from the pulpit on the subject" (*Minutes P.C.U.S.*, 368). The continued difficulty raising candidates for the ministry was exacerbated by the casualties, destruction, and financial vacuum caused by the War Between the States.

19. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States: with an Appendix*, vol. 1 (Augusta: Printed at the Constitutionalist Job Office, 1865) 366.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

“The Harvest is great, but the laborers are few,” is the verse that opened this article and it is the text that is most often used to encourage young men to consider the ministry. It is also the verse that on the one hand, gave the New Side encouragement to reduce Presbyterian ministerial education requirements so more laborers could be found quickly, but on the other hand, the Old Side believed it significant that the laborers be thoroughly educated and qualified bearers of the Gospel.

It is intriguing that educationally well trained ministers are not universally accepted by the church since society places so much emphasis on an education appropriate for the task in other vocations. How many would step into an airliner if they knew that the crew had a total of a few hundred hours flight experience? Would

who are not educated adequately for the ministerial task. Yes, “The Harvest is great, but the laborers are few,” reflects the probably perpetual truth of the situation facing the church from generation to generation, but this *need* for ministers does not *necessitate* placing eternal souls in the hands of those who are inadequately educated. A minister must have knowledge of the Bible and the Westminster Standards to be appropriately prepared for the Presbyterian ministry—the complexities and massiveness of the Word of God is systematized, organized, and explained by the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and the associated catechisms. When the Old Side and the New Side were divided into two Presbyterian churches they both continued to suffer from a shortage of ministers, so the New Side’s ridding itself of the Old Side stringency did not alleviate its ministerial



Columbia Seminary circa 1910: the main building, side dorm and offices. From a postcard in the author’s possession.

one trust a cardiac surgeon for quadruple bypass whose medical training consisted of a college biology degree and some experience as a hospital orderly? Would parents knowingly send their children to a school that was taught by a teacher who was dismissed from college in the second year due to poor grades? The answer to all three questions is, hopefully, a resounding “no,” but well meaning Christians and clergy are willing to place the souls of their families and flocks in the hands of those

shortage; the Old Side struggled to establish an educational program while maintaining tough academic requirements, but it too continued to have a ministerial shortage. It may be that Matthew 9:37 is stating a perpetual fact, that is, the harvest will *always* be so great that no matter how many laborers there are they will never be sufficient to reap the abundant harvest. Though such a thought might be discouraging, it would seem that it should rather be viewed with hope, because the work of each new minister’s preaching is assured of God’s calling out his own to enjoy the benefits of his grace.

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF GEORGE HOWE

George was born in Dedham, Massachusetts, on November 6, 1802, to William and Mary (Gould) Howe.²⁰ His education began with private studies involving both

20. John L. Girardeau, “Eulogy on Professor George Howe, D.D., LL.D.,” in *Memorial Volume of the Semi-Centennial of the Theological Seminary at Columbia, South Carolina* (Columbia: Printed at the Presbyterian Publishing House, 1884), 390; Girardeau’s eulogy (covering pages 387–420), along with E. C. Scott’s, *Ministerial Directory of the Presbyterian Church, U.S. 1861–1941* (n.p.: Published by Order of the General Assembly, 1942), were used for this brief biography.

a local tutor and what is described today as “home schooling.” At a young age, he pursued the study of Latin as a result of his curiosity being raised as he read the ancient Roman sentences in Cotton Mather’s, *Magnalia Christi Americana*. When he moved to Holmsburg, near Philadelphia, at the age of twelve, he studied with Mr. Scofield and continued as his student when he moved to Philadelphia. Howe professed faith in Christ while attending the First Presbyterian Church of the Northern Liberties in Philadelphia, where he heard the preaching of the Word by Dr. James Patterson. Howe’s education continued in Philadelphia with Dr. Joshua Bates, who prepared him to continue his education at Middlebury College, Vermont. The adept scholar was graduated from Middlebury with first honors in 1822. Andover Theological Seminary was his choice for divinity education and he completed the three-year course of studies in 1825. Due to his proficiency at academics, Howe continued to study at Andover for about a year and a half as an Abbott Scholar (Girardeau, 391–393).

In 1827, he accepted an appointment to be the Phillips Professor of Sacred Theology at Dartmouth College. He was only twenty-four years of age when he was honored with the appointment, and after a period of consideration, he accepted the position and was ordained to the ministry as a requirement for both the teaching position and to serve as the pastor of the Congregational Church on the Dartmouth campus. After only a few years struggling to do what he believed was

only an adequate job for both callings, he resigned with some frustration caused by both his combined labors and health problems caused by the severe winters at Dartmouth.

He left Dartmouth, returned to Massachusetts, and then sailed to South Carolina, where he would live the remainder of his life. He lived for a brief time in Charleston following his entry into the state through this port city. During his Low-Country stay, he was approached about becoming the pastor of the First Scots Presbyterian Church in Charleston. At about the same time of the pastoral call, the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia met in Augusta. The Rev. Thomas Golding, who was teaching some theological students in Columbia, had written to his synod requesting the appointment of a teacher of Hebrew and Greek. The Revs. Joseph C. Stiles and Aaron Foster, who had been classmates with Howe at Andover, recommended his appointment to the position. Turning down the call from First Scots, he accepted the teaching position as the Professor of Biblical Literature and began his duties in Columbia in January, 1831 (Girardeau, 392). He continued in that position, supplied pulpits, preached funeral sermons and eulogies, and advised students until his death on April 15, 1883 after fifty-two years at Columbia Seminary. Dr. Howe is buried in the church yard of the First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, where it is commented on his grave marker that he was, “Through more than fifty years a faithful minister of the Gospel.” ■



The old main building at Columbia Seminary, as it is today with the old side dorm and office building torn down, now the Robert Mills House Museum. Detail from a photograph by Barry Waugh.