

The Presbyterian Church and Methodist Revivalism: Central Pennsylvania Perspectives

This issue of *The Chronicle* tells of the encounters of Methodist revivalism with mainstream Protestantism (i.e., the Reformed, Lutheran and Presbyterian denominations) in Central Pennsylvania during the Second Great Awakening – roughly the 1800’s. The roots of revivalism in the Presbyterian Church go back to the First Great Awakening – roughly the 1700’s. The terms “First” and “Second” refer to the waves of awakenings of pietism and revivalism in America.

The First Great Awakening was contemporary with John Wesley (1703-1791) in England and is characterized in America by the ministry of John Wesley’s friend and fellow Holy Club member George Whitefield (1714-1770). But the awakening was not confined to emerging Methodism. Two particularly notable early revivalists (who, being born the same year as John Wesley, were truly his contemporary counterparts in America) were Congregational preacher Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) of New England and Presbyterian cleric Gilbert Tennent (1703-1764) of New Jersey.

The Second Great Awakening gave rise to a myriad of divisions, civil and ecclesiastical trials, new denominations, fringe sects, and religious excesses. The First Great Awakening, by contrast, was generally more accepted by American churches as a renewal movement – even within the Reformed and Lutheran traditions. The Presbyterian Church was the exception. It was the one mainline American denomination which was seriously divided by revivalism during the First Great Awakening.

The division came to be known as the “New Light Schism” and the denomination divided into New Light and Old Light factions. These were the terms that eventually prevailed when the controversy re-emerged during the Second Great Awakening, but the terms New Side and Old Side were also used during the early years. One source¹ gives the following account.

The New Light Schism was a division in the Presbyterian denomination in the mid - eighteenth century primarily over practical matters of Christian experience. The schism occurred in 1741 when the Old Lights, who were predominantly of Scotch - Irish heritage, ejected the New Light faction and formed the Old Side synod of Philadelphia. The New Light party, with their English Puritan background, grew out of the Great Awakening and revived a more experiential interpretation of the Christian life. They organized New Side presbyteries.

Both parties professed traditional Calvinist doctrine, but they differed substantially on its practical implications. Old Light ministers, interpreting Calvinism in a rationalistic manner, claimed that holding orthodox theology was more important than Christian living. For them God’s sovereign decree

¹ The BELIEVE website at <http://mb-soft.com/believe/indexaz.html> is an encyclopedia of religious information. The paragraphs that follow were taken from the “New Light Schism” entry and are as concise and objective as any commentary on the subject.

determined who was elect, and correct theological belief, not manner of life, was the only major practical sign of salvation. Moral laxity often resulted from such de-emphasis on religious experience, leading to several Old Light pastors being tried by presbyteries for persistent immoral living and drunkenness.

In contrast, New Light Gilbert Tennent stressed piety as indispensable to Calvinist theology. He preached conviction of sin, teaching his hearers that true faith in Christ required a vital conversion experience leading to moral obedience and personal holiness. In "The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry," he contended that some Old Light clergy were actually unregenerate, and he encouraged believers to seek spiritual nurture elsewhere. Old Light members countered that New Lights were guilty of "enthusiasm" and defamatory accusations. Their itinerant preaching and their encouragement of laymen to pressure fellow church members into New Light experience violated Presbyterian polity.

During the schism New Siders experienced dramatic growth and founded the College of New Jersey (Princeton) to educate their ministers. Meanwhile the Old Side generally failed in its educational efforts and actually declined in number. In 1758 New Side initiatives produced reunion on conditions favorable to that group.

The 1741 Old/New schism affected most of the Presbyterian congregations in Central Pennsylvania – including Paxton and Derry in Dauphin County, and those across the river in the Cumberland Valley. Even after the 1758 reunion, there was still much distrust, finger-pointing, and name-calling. In some instances separate ecclesiastical groupings of the former New Side and Old Side congregations occurred within the framework of the united denomination.

Eventually, as in the Reformed and Lutheran churches, a conservative backlash organized to combat the Americanization of the denomination and there was a formal split in the mainstream Presbyterian Church in the USA. From 1837 to 1871 there were again two mainstream Presbyterian denominations: the New School Presbyterians and the Old School Presbyterians. They re-merged in 1871. What happened in Harrisburg during that time is typical of what was occurring in Presbyterian congregations across Central Pennsylvania.

Market Square Presbyterian Church was formed in 1794 and followed the general pattern of Americanization and toleration of the new measures. In 1831, church member Mary Ann McKinney set off with her new husband William Alexander to begin evangelizing Hawaii – and became the story line of the James Michener novel Hawaii. Following the denominational division of 1837, the Market Square formally voted in 1838 to align itself with the New School.

In 1858, 42 conservative members left to form an Old School congregation just a few blocks away – Pine Street Presbyterian Church. The congregation's first sermon was delivered by the pastor from the (Old School) Middle Springs Presbyterian Church in Newville. It wasn't until 1860 that the congregation could secure William C. Cattell² to be its first regular pastor. A

² William C. Cattell (1827-1898) had been a fellow student at Princeton of anti-revivalist John L. Nevius (of Mercersburg Theology fame). According to the memoir presented at his memorial

1968 congregational publication³ contains two revealing paragraphs that comment on the reasons for its formation and its continuing adherence to those standards.

As early as the first meeting of the session, May 24, 1858, it was voted to encourage each member to buy a copy of the Westminster Confession of Faith. From the very beginning this congregation has been truly reformed in doctrine and practice. The very reason for organizing in 1858 was to form a congregation in union with the "Old School" Assembly which was true to the distinctive faith and order of the Presbyterian Church.

Today [1968] Pine Street continues to worship and teach according to a distinctively reformed pattern recognized by a Session which also voted on May 24, 1858, to urge each member to purchase a copy of the Psalms and Hymns published by the Presbyterian Board of Publication. Our order of service compares favorably with the one proposed by John Calvin in Geneva and with the one in use in the Mother Church of Scotland. Our Church-School, always strong on confessional instruction, still remains a vital part of our program for both children and adults.

The preceding is just one of several Central Pennsylvania examples that could be given to illustrate the tensions within Presbyterianism created by the new measures. Another very similar sequence of events occurred in Carlisle, where First Presbyterian Church identified with the New School methodology⁴ and the conservative backlash eventually led to the formation of Second Presbyterian Church in 1833. When the formal denominational split came in 1837, First became New School and Second became Old School.

While the 1871 Presbyterian reunion returned the two factions to a single denomination, the old wounds were slow to heal. In 1889 much ceremony was made of the Centennial Celebration of the Carlisle Presbytery. By then the Old School theology dominated the area and the principal organizers and contributors to the celebration were pastors Ebenezer Erskine of Big Spring Presbyterian and George Norcross of Second Presbyterian – two pastors and congregations that had remained staunchly Old School. Rev. Erskine was responsible for preparing biographical sketches of all former ministers of the presbytery congregations.

service, "he received an urgent call to become the first pastor of the Pine Street Church" and left a professorship at Lafayette College in 1860 to fill the pulpit. After 3 very successful years, he returned to Lafayette as its President.

³ "A Backward Glance... A Forward Look" by Bob Larson in the April 1968 100th anniversary issue of Life at Pine Street.

⁴ A prominent surname among the New School preachers to occupy the pulpit at First Presbyterian was Duffield. George Duffield I (1732-1790) was the pastor when Big Spring, Monaghan, and Carlisle were on the same circuit. As was typical among Presbyterians at the time, his New Light preaching was well-received in the large town of Carlisle but met with opposition in the more rural communities of Newville and Dillsburg – and Duffield eventually moved to the friendlier confines of the Philadelphia Pine Street Church. His grandson George Duffield III (1794-1868) returned to serve Carlisle First from 1816 to 1835. While his revivalism succeeded in adding many to First Church it also created the division that led to the formation of Second Church and, indirectly, the passing of Dickinson College from the Presbyterians to the Methodists – but that's a whole other story. His son George Duffield IV (1818-1888), born in Carlisle, was the noted Presbyterian revivalist who authored the rousing gospel song "Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus."

The following excerpt from his sketch of one of First Church's former pastors reveals the obvious bias at the celebration for the "united" presbytery.⁵

Rev. Conway Phelps Wing. Dr. Wing made a profession of his faith in Christ at the age of thirteen and was received into the communion of the church at Phelps, New York, of which his father was a ruling elder. He prepared for college at Geneva Academy and entered Hamilton College, from which he graduated with honor in 1828 at the age of nineteen. Having chosen the ministry as his life work, he at once entered Auburn Theological Seminary and graduated from that institution in 1831. He was licensed in that same year, and in the year following was ordained by the same Presbytery, that of Geneva, and installed, September 27, 1832, as pastor of the church at Sodus, New York. In this place he labored with great earnestness for five years and then for two years, 1837 and 1838, at Ogden, New York.

When he entered the ministry, it was a time of great religious excitement in western New York. It was the period of the revival movement under the leadership of such men as Charles G. Finney and others, in connection with what was known as the new measures. Mr. Finney, while a man of great earnestness, much ability, and unquestioned zeal for the conversion of men, yet from the beginning of his career, was regarded as an unsound, unsafe and dangerous leader in any religious movement and as wholly off the orthodox basis as to doctrine and practice. His zeal for the false doctrines he preached knew no bounds: that mankind are not born in a state of sin and condemnation; that no man is chargeable with either guilt or sin until he deliberately violates the known law of God; that sinners are bound to change their own hearts, and that regeneration is the sinner's own act; that all men have plenary power to do all that God requires of them; that God cannot certainly control the acts of free agents so as to prevent the present amount of sin in a moral system. These and kindred views, entered largely into the subject matter of his preaching, and the opposite doctrines in the church standards came in for a corresponding share of wild denunciation and unsparing abuse.

Dr. Wing, in his history of his pastorate in the First church of Carlisle, says that it was "his privilege to commence his ministry amidst the powerful revivals that prevailed throughout western New York, and participate in them with great zeal." And Dr. Robinson⁶ says in his memorial discourse of Dr. Wing, in this connection, that Charles G. Finney, "was the most successful preacher of the gospel in his age." This statement seems passing strange to the present writer when Mr. Finney and his views and work have passed into history and have taken their fixed place in the general judgment of the church. Dr. Robinson, however, felt constrained, in view of the known character and issues of that religious movement, to throw in these qualifying statements: "Some evils mingled with the movement, and to some extent marred the final results, but vast

⁵ The Centennial Memorial of the Presbytery of Carlisle, by George Norcross (editor), 1889, vol. II, pp 265-266.

⁶ Thomas H. Robinson was pastor of Market Square Presbyterian in Harrisburg from 1854 to 1884 and left to join the faculty of Western Theological Seminary, which merged into the Pittsburg Theological Seminary in 1959.

good was accomplished. With all that was good in that era of revivals, Dr. Wing deeply sympathized, and was extensively engaged in active service."

The New Light Presbyterians seemed to have their greatest successes in the metropolitan areas and in regions that were not strongly Scotch-Irish. In Central Pennsylvania conflict occurred not only in the Harrisburg-Carlisle area, but in isolated congregations from the New York line to the Maryland line – often only hinted at in church and secular histories. In Lawrenceville⁷ on the New York line, for example, "The [Presbyterian] church was divided during the controversy between the Old and New Schools in 1860. It was again united in 1870."⁸

That the following letters from Miss Mattie McNeal to her future husband Tom Appleby come from a rural area with a definite Scotch-Irish presence makes them all the more remarkable. There are frequent favorable references to many Methodistic practices – revival ("protracted") meetings in the Presbyterian Church, joy for persons who "get religion" and concern for those who have not yet experienced salvation, personal pietism. Both young people seem very comfortable combining Methodism's belief in free-will with the Presbyterian doctrine of a completely sovereign God.

Because their common home congregation at Shade Gap and their present congregations in Amberson and Mount Union were so rural, they were not served or visited by "big name" preachers whose theological positions are well-known. But whatever the formal affiliation of the congregations might have been, it appears that the pastors and parishioners, at least Mattie and Tom, knew God's loving presence both in the heart-warming experience and in the sacraments and confessions of the Church.

⁷ Following the devastating flood of 1972, the Lawrenceville area was the scene of unique Methodist-Presbyterian cooperation. With church buildings of both denominations severely damaged, and with congregations in a state of numerical decline, it was agreed that the Methodist and Presbyterian congregations in Lawrence unite and become Methodist, and that the Methodist and Presbyterian congregations in nearby Tioga unite and become Presbyterian.

⁸ History of Tioga County, Pennsylvania, W.W. Munsell & Company, 1883, page 188.