

# The Decline of American Presbyterianism

(The First Time).

being

A BOOK REVIEW AND COMMENTARY BY

Kevin Reed

concerning:

1. Princeton Seminary Vol: 2

**THE MAJESTIC TESTIMONY**

By David Calhoun (Banner of Truth 1996)

and

2. **CROSSED FINGERS:**

How the Liberals

Captured the Presbyterian Church

By Gary North (Institute of Christian Economics 1996)

Last year, (in British Reformed Journal No. 21 Jan.- March 1998) the present writer reviewed volume 1 of David Calhoun's *History of Princeton Seminary*. The first volume of Calhoun's narrative ended at a pivotal point in the history of Northern Presbyterianism: the reunion of the Old School and New School Assemblies in 1869.

Realizing that a significant part of Princeton's story (as well as the story of the Northern Presbyterianism) was yet to be told, I eagerly took up volume two of Calhoun's narrative, shortly after the book was published. Unfortunately, the second volume, *The Majestic Testimony*, is a major disappointment. Readers who want to know what happened after 1869, in order to gain an understanding of the demise of Princeton (and Northern Presbyterianism) will require additional sources beyond Calhoun's second volume. Therefore, we are presenting readers with a combined book review, in which we will also draw attention to another important work, Gary North's *Crossed Fingers: How the Liberals Captured the Presbyterian Church*.

## The Missing Testimony

The leaven of ecclesiastical toleration was present within American Presbyterianism from an early date. The confessional revisions of 1787 enshrined

pluralism within the standards of the church. Thus, the events which transpired after the reunion of 1869 must be seen in the wider context of growing cultural and ecclesiastical toleration of error.

Princeton Seminary represented the Old School tradition; yet the practical discernment of the Princetonians, along with the will to resist error, dissipated over time. Early Princetonians vehemently opposed Charles Finney, and his Pelagian evangelistic techniques. Nevertheless, as Calhoun relates, later Princetonians were supportive of D. L. Moody and Billy Sunday (pp. 24-26, 298-300). Early Princetonians rejected German textual criticism, but later Princetonians made concessions to "lower" textual criticism.<sup>1</sup>

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And then there was the problem of how to react to evolution. While Charles Hodge attacked "Darwinism," he and other Presbyterian stalwarts refused to defend the six-day creation of the Genesis record; instead, they looked for ways to accommodate the biblical record to scientific speculations about the age of the earth.

In the last half of the 18th century, there was a remarkable declension among Northern Presbyterians concerning denominational distinctives of polity. Issues pertaining to worship were not generally a topic of discussion after the passing of Samuel Miller. With respect to Presbyterian government, the Northern Assembly followed Hodge in his erroneous notions on ecclesiastical polity; and some of these views laid the foundation for the centralized bureaucracy which the liberals used to capture the denomination after the turn of the century.

Many sad facts are recorded in Calhoun's narrative. The problem is that the author presents some of these facts in a positive vein; or else, he fails to provide an analysis showing how these developments contributed to the decline of Princeton. As his account draws to a conclusion, the final defence of the Princetonians is that the liberals ought to leave their school alone, so that it can survive as the last institutional representative of the Old School tradition. Now that's pluralism with a vengeance: please don't disturb our seminary, so that we can preserve a living relic of what the church used to believe.

MAJESTIC Testimony? or MISSING Testimony?

Is this a majestic testimony? A more accurate subtitle would be *The Missing Testimony*.

1. Contrast J. A. Alexander's attitude in his commentary on Mark, with Warfield's later support of the Wescott-Hort text. Alexander dismisses textual critics of Mark 16 for their reliance upon the "Vatican manuscript" and "German ingenuity," (*Commentary on Mark* 1858; rpt. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1984), p. 438. [In a related vein, in support of the traditional Greek text, see Robert L. Dabney's essays on "The Doctrinal Various Readings of the New Testament Greek," and "The Revised Version of the New Testament," in *Discussions*, vol. 1 (1890), pp. 350-398.]

## Broken Vows, Crossed Fingers, and Subversion

Enter Gary North, the controversial reconstructionist author. If you really want to know what happened to Northern Presbyterianism (and Princeton Seminary), Gary North's chronicle is the work to consult for a detailed account. His book is over 1000 pages long, and with good reason.<sup>2</sup> North is not content with a superficial survey of the theological broadsides of the time. He looks behind the scenes to find out what liberal Presbyterians were doing to deliberately undermine the theological standards of the church. North analyzes the weaknesses of the Old School Presbyterians to see why they lost the battle for the church. North also demonstrates how struggles within the Presbyterian church were part of the larger culture wars for American society from the mid-1800's to the mid-1900's.

Perhaps we should begin with an explanation of the title of the book *Crossed Fingers*. In a childish manner, men have often broken a promise by saying that *their pledge did not count, because they had their fingers crossed when they made the promise*. In a similar fashion, Presbyterian ministers have often taken ordination vows to uphold the Westminster Standards, but they have resorted to mental reservation or evasion to dilute the meaning of this solemn oath.<sup>3</sup>

North points to a compelling fact: during the final struggle for control of the Presbyterian Church, all parties had their fingers crossed, because no group - not even the Old School - maintained an unreserved commitment to the doctrinal standards of the church. This meant that the battle had to be fought on other grounds, because no sanctions would be brought against unorthodox ministers, on the basis of deviation from the confession or catechisms of the church.

North's account divides American Presbyterians into three categories:

- (1.) **judicialists**, who defended the objective and doctrinal nature of the Christian faith;
- (2.) **experientialists**, who were less concerned about doctrine, provided a man exhibited an experiential profession of Christianity;
- (3.) **power religionists**, who wanted to harness the church to serve the interests of liberalism.

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2. The extraordinary length of the volume is justified, in spite of the fact that the author takes the long road for the journey. There is much repetition in the analysis, from one section to another; and had some of these redundancies been eliminated, the book might have been shortened (say to about 900 pages) without loss of content. Nevertheless, "repetition is the mother of learning" a maxim that the author doubtless holds in high estimation.

3. For a book-length study on the art of theological equivocation, see **Perez Zagorin**, *Ways of Lying: Dissimulation, Persecution, and Conformity in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990). The present writer has published a brief review of Zagorin's book: "Religious Dissemblers and Theological Liars" (reprinted article; Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage, 1997).

The characteristics of each group are not completely exclusive: both judicialists and experientialists upheld the inerrancy of scripture; while many modernists could testify to moving religious experiences in their lives. The important factor is to see how each group evaluated the situation in light of their preeminent commitment to their doctrinal priorities, or their experience, or their modernism.

By the mid-1800's, three theological factions were visible within American Presbyterianism: (1.) **the Old School**, with its characteristic emphasis on doctrine and scholarship; (2.) **the New School**, with its emphasis on experience, heavily influenced by Arminian evangelism; (3.) **religious modernists**, who were undermining the authority of the Bible. By the end of the conflict, in the early 1900's, these groups were typified respectively by the familiar labels of **Calvinists**, **fundamentalists**, and **liberals**.

North illustrates how the reunion of 1869 was essentially a compromise by the Old School. By reuniting with the New School, the Old School made it impossible for Calvinistic doctrine to be enforced in the church. On the principle of the "lowest common denominator," the New School would, in practical terms, set the standards of enforcement in the church.

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Now, one characteristic of the experiential party was their aversion to conflict. Since their desire was to get on with the mission of the church with a minimum of fuss over doctrinal precision, they did not want to be troubled by the discord inherent in heresy trials. Thus, the newly united church rarely took notice of the subversive activities among the denomination's seminary professors. It took an infraction of grave proportions, stated in an inflammatory manner, to elicit judicial action in the church. The case of Charles Briggs was a notable example of how far a man could go, in denying the doctrine of scripture, before the church would take decisive action.

In the case of Briggs, even the Old School was guilty of foot-dragging.<sup>4</sup> The Princeton men had failed to act decisively against Briggs, when his aberrations were early manifest. That failure to act decisively was an indication that the war was already lost. North correctly sees that the war was lost on the basis of judicial authority. The outcome turned upon the inability of the orthodox party to impose negative sanctions upon heretics. North observes that the tactical error of the Old School was to allow issues to devolve into merely academic disputes conducted in theological journals.

4. Respecting the Briggs case, **Calhoun** observes: "Many in the church were tired of the 'gentlemanly' tactics of Princeton Seminary and wanted a more aggressive approach to the 'Briggs problem'" (Calhoun, p.136).

The academic cast of the Old School played itself out in a predictable manner: "The conservatives were content to accept the language of orthodoxy rather than substance. The liberals have used this blindness on the part of conservatives to their own advantage." "The comforting presence of the Westminster Confession and its two catechisms as polished antiques in the denomination's local prayer closets served as salve for many conservative consciences," even though the confessional standards had been "compromised into institutional irrelevance" (pp. 774, 779, 775).

In a similar fashion today, the stricter "confessionalists" in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) engage in theological debates with heterodox opponents within the denomination, but they take no substantial judicial action in these cases. There is an endless series of complaints, newsletters, and magazine articles. But at the end of the day, what good is another study paper approved by a presbytery, or another report by an assembly study committee? "There is no new thing under the sun," says Solomon (Eccl.1:9).<sup>5</sup>

*Crossed Fingers* illustrates numerous problems connected to seminary training, such as the inordinate influence of seminary professors, and the trouble created when seminaries are insulated from the effective control of the church courts. When you combine these factors with a requirement of seminary training for ministers (as modern Presbyterians do),<sup>6</sup> you have a prescription for disaster.

North examines the inherent problem created when ministerial candidates are initially required to have a degree from an accredited university. In other words, before a man even reaches seminary, he is expected to be well-schooled in the academic humanism of our culture. Why should this be a requirement for the ministry? The goal for an educated ministry is equated with a ministry of academic degrees.

The trend toward formal academic training led to another development within American Presbyterianism: the declining significance of presbyterial exams. A seminary degree was virtually a passport into the ministry. There was a desperate need to guard the gate into the ministry at the presbytery level. Yet, the Old School Presbyterians found themselves powerless to block the entry of heterodox men onto the rolls of the presbyteries (pp. 299-302).

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5. There is little wonder that even the more rigorous parties in contemporary Presbyterian denominations do not wish to discuss discipline as a mark of the true church.

6. It should be remembered that even among American Presbyterians, seminary training had not always been required. Prior to the establishment of Princeton Seminary in 1812, ministers were trained in a tutorial manner, in apprenticeship with local pastors. The seminaries were formed to augment the resources available for training young men for the ministry, but initially the seminaries were not viewed as an exclusive means of pastoral training. Nevertheless, within a century, the seminary system had co-opted the former methods of training. **James Henley Thornwell** had raised objections to this trend in 1847, but his plea fell on deaf ears; see "*The Call of the Minister*," pp. 27-28 in volume 4 of Thornwell's *Collected Writings* (1873: rpt. Banner of Truth Edinburgh, 1974).

Part of North's keen analysis is in showing how the modernists were able to use the New School experientialists against the more doctrinally precise members of the Old School. It is a maxim of politics (ecclesiastical or otherwise) that the soft middle constitutes the swing vote: "the large, less committed middle will decide which way the organization goes" (p. 646). As the vast majority of men in the church became largely indifferent to confessional dogma, they were more interested in carrying out of the work of the church, and feared getting bogged down in heresy trials and other unproductive tasks. This aversion to controversy shielded the modernists from judicial action.

Moreover, by the end of the fight, in the 1920's and 1930's, there were many orthodox men who saw that they no longer had the votes to win in the church courts. Instead of fighting from the high ground of principle, many "conservatives" capitulated to the idea of an "inclusive" church, and ceased to take a meaningful stand against error. When J. Gresham Machen left the denomination to form a more orthodox church, very few ministers went with him. Why?

To understand the latter capitulation, North makes a brief analysis of the ministerial pension plan, to illustrate how financial pressures were brought to bear upon ministers who contemplated leaving the denomination. Of course, ministers of the gospel are not supposed to base their actions inordinately upon financial rewards or punishments; but the reality of the situation is that they often do. Looking among "conservative" Presbyterian denominations today, one may ask, "Why don't the men who are really reformed take a stronger stand?" In private conversation, you may be told the answer: if such men become too vocal (even without seeking judicial action against heretics), they will lose the esteem of their colleagues, forfeit their pastorates, and, in effect, be blacklisted. "They must provide for their families," you see. Salary, benefits, reputation, and retirement will often eclipse theological commitments. North's willingness to "follow the money" also reveals some fascinating correlations between the battles within the Presbyterian church and the broader conflicts within the American culture. He shows how money from outside the denomination was used to fund subversives within the denomination. This was not an isolated case. The social engineers of the day felt it was their duty to reshape the entire society to reflect modernist ideals. For liberals, the Presbyterian church was one battlefield among many.

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Ultimately, as Gary North illustrates, the orthodox Presbyterians did not have an adequate battle plan. The Old School conservatives laboured merely as negative reactionaries to the agenda set by their opponents. This strictly defensive posture is, as North says, "surrender on the installment plan" (p. 840).

Now it's time for a couple of disclaimers. In spite of furnishing a wealth of data, and a very insightful analysis, North's book is not without some problems of its own. The volume is written with Ray Sutton's covenantal model as a large template for the parameters of the analysis; considering North's bravado that Sutton has "cracked the code of the Bible's covenant structure," readers will understand that this perspective colours the author's conclusions.

Likewise, North's advice for injecting episcopacy into Presbyterian polity is without adequate foundation. He misunderstands the role of the old Scottish superintendents, which is not surprising, given the only source referenced for this suggestion is in favour of episcopacy (p.933).

The superintendents were originally itinerant preachers whose primary duty was to plant churches in rural communities where there was no regular ministry. The superintendents were subject to the authority of the church courts, and they were required to preach regularly in the regions placed under their care. They were specifically contrasted to the "idle bishops" that had previously plagued the Scottish church; hence, the superintendents were not allowed to stay in one place for more than a month, until they passed throughout the entire bounds of their charge. In short, they were preachers without a regular congregation - home missionaries, if you will - on the same level of authority with other ministers.<sup>7</sup>

After the initial success of the Protestant reformation in Scotland, enterprising politicians sought to reintroduce various forms of prelacy, in order to gain further control of the church (and church funds).<sup>8</sup>

The first attempt came in 1572, when "ministers who were so mean as to accept of bishoprics under this disgraceful and simonaical paction, exposed themselves to general contempt, and were called, by way of derision, *tulchan bishops*- a tulchan

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<sup>7</sup>. See the *First Book of Discipline* (1560) of the Church of Scotland, the sections on superintendents under the fifth head, concerning the provision for ministers. A newly typeset, looseleaf edition of this document is found in *The First and Second Books of Discipline* (rpt. Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage, 1993); see pp. 46-55 therein for pertinent remarks respecting superintendents.

<sup>8</sup>. It is interesting that the advocates of episcopacy in Scotland were early proponents of the kind of power religion which Gary North so sternly criticizes throughout his book. Near the end of Knox's life, the Scottish reformer received a letter from Theodore Beza in which Beza remarks:

"This also, my Knox, which is almost patent to our very eyes, I would remind yourself and the other brethren, that as Bishops brought forth the Papacy, so will false Bishops (the relics of Popery) bring in Epicurism into the world. Let those who devise the safety of the Church avoid this pestilence, and when in the process of time you shall have subdued that plague in Scotland, do not, I pray you, ever admit it again, however it may flatter by the pretence of preserving unity, which deceived even many of the best of those of former times."

(Theodore Beza to John Knox (12 April 1572), in *The Works of John Knox* (David Laing, ed. Edinburgh: James Thin, 1895), vol. 6, p. 614.]

being a calf's skin stuffed with straw, which the country people set up beside the cow to induce here to give her milk more freely."<sup>9</sup>

The "Second Episcopacy," to which North refers directly (p. 933), was during the reign of Charles II: a period roughly equivalent to the "killing times," in which the Covenanters were ruthlessly persecuted. This is a strange precedent to cite in discussing recommendations for ecclesiastical management, unless one wishes to emulate the despotic policies of Archbishop James Sharp.<sup>10</sup>

North has rightly raised the issue of disingenuous subscription to the confessional standards. Upon reflection, I recalled a previous experience when Mr. North and I attended the same church many years ago in Tyler. At that time, our local congregation professed adherence to the original version of the Westminster Standards; yet the minister and elders introduced liturgical practices of worship which flatly contradicted confessional teaching.<sup>11</sup>

As North has pointed out, this is an issue of integrity. The liberals lied when subscribing the Confession, because they believed in situational ethics. It is more difficult to grasp how others can justify their duplicity, when they profess to believe in the abiding standards of the law of God, such as the ninth commandment.

North's book raises important ramifications for Presbyterians who wish to construct a genuinely reformed denomination. Among the most important factors are the following:

(1.) A reformed denomination must be structured differently than the centralized models of American Presbyterianism. Centralized bureaucracies (especially church boards) allow for an easy takeover by a heterodox party. Church boards, colleges, and seminaries are usually insulated from appropriate review and control by the courts of the church.

(2.) There is a need to clarify the role of the confessional standards, especially as regards elders and ministers. In what ways are the creeds of the church binding upon church officers and members? Will discipline be administered to those who deviate from the confessional standards? Additionally, North notes the difficulty of

9. **Thomas M'Crie** [the younger], *The Story of the Scottish Church* (1874; rpt. Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Pubns., 1988), pp. 63-64.

10. A political opportunist, **Sharp** was universally despised in Scotland. He was assassinated in 1679 by a band of Presbyterians who were determined to stop Sharp's persecutions, as well as throw off the yoke of prelacy.

11. **James Jordan** was a leading influence in this movement toward Anglo-Catholic forms of worship; nevertheless, he could not have implemented such measures without the consent of the session. (See my earlier criticisms of Jordan and the Tylerites in *The Canterbury Tales: An Extended Review and Commentary Based Upon the Geneva Papers* (1984; rpt. Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage, 1989); note pp. 27-28). The fact that Anglo-Catholic worship is presently being introduced within churches professing Presbyterian principles illustrates that crossed fingers are found in divers quarters- from modernists, to "evangelicals," to reconstructionists. Mr. North has performed a valuable service by calling attention to the disingenuous nature of confessional subscription within contemporary reformed churches.



constructing a mechanism for confessional amendment,<sup>12</sup> when the confessional standards are simultaneously enforced with negative sanctions. Any officer who teaches contrary to the confession of the church should be removed from office. If that is the case, what process can be adopted for legitimate confessional revision, since anyone who expresses a proposal for revision invites negative sanctions against himself?

(3.) Communicant membership should not automatically carry with it the right to vote in congregational meetings. In many “conservative” American Presbyterian churches, the right to vote is extended even to youthful members (teenagers) who have been admitted as communicants; and attempts by congregations to institute age restrictions have been overturned by higher church courts. In such an environment of ultra-democracy, any effort to limit voting will be met with resistance. Nevertheless, voting is an exercise of authority, and members who exercise the power to vote should be obligated to uphold the standards of the church.

These are some tough issues which contemporary Presbyterians need to face. A study of earlier American Presbyterianism can help in this respect, if men are wise enough to learn from negative examples which serve as beacons to avoid dangerous waters. North’s book could be especially helpful on this count, if members of the PCA and OPC took seriously the tell-tale signs of the past, in order to recognize the pitfalls of the present.

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Unfortunately, there is a tendency on the part of many “conservative” Presbyterians to look back with fondness upon 19th century Presbyterianism, as if it was a golden age of Presbyterianism. It wasn’t - it wasn’t even close to it. It was an era of widespread apostasy. May contemporary Presbyterians avoid the detours and traps of the past.

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<sup>12</sup>. The idea of confessional amendments is often taboo among strict Presbyterians, because we live in an age of great apostasy. Among those who hold the Westminster Standards in high esteem, there is an understandable fear that, with contemporary hostilities toward doctrinal precision, any alterations will merely undermine the orthodoxy of the Standards. To date, American Presbyterian confessional revisions have embraced pluralism and softened the Confession's stand against the papacy; the revision of 1903 opened the door to universalism. Nevertheless, the concept of confessional revision cannot be dismissed entirely. The Scottish Confession of 1560 acknowledges an openness to correction in its Preface, where it states, "if any man will note in this our confession any article or sentence repugning to God's holy word, that it would please him of his gentleness, and for Christian charity's sake, to admonish us of the same in writing; and we, of our honour and fidelity, do promise unto him satisfaction from the mouth of God (that is, from his holy scriptures), or else reformation of that which he shall prove to be amiss."

That there have been proper confessional amendments, by way of addition, is an indisputable fact. When the Westminster Standards were added to the other Scottish creeds, the purpose was not to repeal the earlier creeds, but to expand the testimony of the church. As new conflicts and heresies arise, it is inevitable that the church will supplement her confessional testimony.