

American Presbyterian History

Week 13 – American Presbyterianism Post-1936

Trinity Presbyterian Church

1. The Southern PCUS and the Formation of the PCA
 - a. The PCUS was about 40 years behind the northern PCUSA in its slide into modernism.
 - i. During the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy, the PCUS tended to remain more conservative.
 - ii. The southern Presbyterians had historically tended to shy away from social issues because of their views on the spirituality of the church.
 - b. But in the 1960s, the drift towards liberalism caught up with the PCUS.
 - i. Study committees during this period questioned predestination, supported women's ordination, tolerated abortion, and opposed capital punishment.
 - ii. Barthianism and Neo-Orthodoxy also took hold. (see below, 2.a)
 - c. The dissent and formation of the **Presbyterian Church in America** (PCA) in 1973.
 - i. There were concerns from both the ministers and the elders about how the mission of the church was turning more social. They also recognized how this was extending into issues relating to missions and evangelism.
 - ii. They began forming groups and calling the PCUS back to its original mission.
 - iii. In 1973, 260 churches broke away from the PCUS to form the PCA. They were a diverse group of Reformed churches, but they were united in their escape from liberalism.
2. The Mainline Trajectory
 - a. The influence of **Karl Barth and Neo-Orthodoxy**
 - i. Neo-orthodoxy represented a shift right from modernism, but not far enough.
 - ii. Instead of seeing *the Bible as the Word of God*, neo-orthodoxy sees *the Word of God as found in the Bible*. **What is the subtle difference between these ideas?**
 - iii. It views Jesus as the only infallible source of revelation, and the Bible is a unique and authoritative witness to Jesus.
 - iv. It allows for the Word of God to come afresh to us by pulling it away from the Biblical meaning and giving a new meaning as individuals encounter it.
 - v. Understanding this shift helps to understanding the mainline churches today.
 - b. **The Confession of 1967** was adopted by the PCUSA.
 - i. It was a statement on Scripture embracing the Barthian/neo-orthodox idea of the Word of God transcending the Bible.

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- ii. It was also a social gospel document dealing with the Vietnam War, women's rights and ordination, and civil rights. Civil religion now formally played a part.
 - iii. Prior to the formation of the PCA, there was some opposition to its adoption.
 - c. In 1983, the PCUSA and the PCUS reunite.
 - i. For the first time since 1837, the PCUSA was finally brought back together.
 - ii. There was now a unified mainline Presbyterian church, which is as we know it.
 - iii. Today, the PCUSA is concerned generally with social religion and issues, and the Barthian view of Scripture allows it to do so while still claiming to listen to God.
 - d. A renewed movement towards semi-conservatism in the PCUSA has arisen since.
 - i. The **Evangelical Presbyterian Church** (EPC) reacted against the liberalism in the PCUSA, but not far enough to join the OPC or PCA. They formed their own denomination in 1981 and are open to women's ordination.
 - ii. Another group – the **Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians** (ECO) – has similarly followed suit and left the PCUSA in 2012.
- 3. The Conservative Trajectory
 - a. The formation of the PCA in 1973, which is still focused largely in the south.
 - b. The consolidation of the RPCES into the PCA in 1981.
 - i. The Reformed Presbyterian Church (Evangelical Synod) was a split from the Reformed Presbyterian Church and had a connection with the BPC.
 - ii. This represented a sort of reunion between the North-South churches and Old School-New School descendants in the young PCA.
 - c. Conservative ecumenical movements:
 - i. The almost-unions of the OPC and the PCA in 1981 and 1986.
 - ii. The formation of the **North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council** (NAPARC) as an ecumenical association of Reformed churches.
 - d. Korean-American Presbyterianism has also been growing predominantly in the west.
 - e. While the mainline churches are on a well-documented decline, the conservative churches are thriving.
 - i. How can we account for the mainline dropping and the conservatives growing?
 - ii. Studies show that many people are not leaving the PCUSA for the OPC or PCA, but are actually leaving the church. Why do you think that is so?

Next Week...*Reflections and Conclusions*