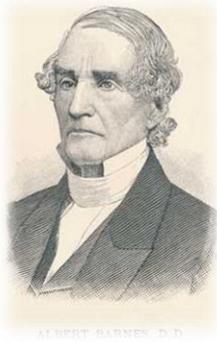


# American Presbyterian History

## 1. Historical Context

- a. The Second Great Awakening and revivalism was still in full force.
  - i. Charles Finney was still the most well-known revivalist and a man of influence.
  - ii. Revivalism began to determine theological teaching.
  - iii. Voluntary associations instead of denominational lines were the preferred mode of expressing unity. These associations also leaned towards moralism.
  - iv. An overly-sensitive ecumenicity between denominations over doctrines arose.
- b. The slow theological drift became more apparent.
  - i. In what became known as the New England Theology, the purpose and efficacy of the atonement was questioned.
  - ii. The drift represented a departure from the Reformed ideas of original sin.
  - iii. These ideas had direct lines drawn from them to revivalist tendencies.
  - iv. Candidates were allowed into the ministry without strong doctrinal conviction.
  - v. In a notable case, Lyman Beecher (1775 – 1863) was a minister on trial for some of these views, but was eventually considered to be “comparatively orthodox.”
- c. Albert Barnes (1798 – 1870)
  - i. Barnes was s proponent of the zealous revivalism that was going on at the time.
  - ii. In “The Way of Salvation,” he questioned the imputation of Adam’s sin.
  - iii. Though he still affirmed that salvation was a grace of God through the Spirit’s renewing, he was clearly on an opposite trajectory.
  - iv. His presbytery studied the matter and condemned his sermon. However, the General Assembly found him to be adequate (though with reservations).
  - v. Both the Barnes and Beecher trials had a cumulative effect to open a breach within the Presbyterian church.



## 2. The Old School – New School Controversy

- a. It’s clear that the Presbyterian Church lacked a clear denominational identity.
- b. The Old School Presbyterians
  - i. Their theological convictions were represented in the *Western Memorial*, a document that took issues with teachings that denied Adam’s representation of humanity, the imputation of Adam’s sin, human depravity as its product, the inability to follow the law and the need for regeneration, and Jesus’ vicarious sacrifice.

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- ii. They went on the offensive to adopt new measures for enforcing ministers' credentials and standards.
    - iii. They were against the revivalism and moral activism that was starting to characterize the church.
    - iv. The Old School wanted to maintain the purity of the Presbyterian church.
    - v. They also wanted to abolish the 1801 Plan of Union which established Congregationalists and Presbyterians working together.
  - c. The New School Presbyterians
    - i. There was a sympathy to an embrace of the New England theology and the loosened ideas of imputed sin, depravity, and the purpose of the atonement.
    - ii. Revivalism was greeted much more warmly than by the Old School.
    - iii. There was a nationalistic idea of the church in America that helped to fuel the moralism campaigns. It was not just about saving souls, but saving the nation.
    - iv. There wasn't a desire to consciously break from being Presbyterian, but to find an identity within it.
  - d. Split of 1838
    - i. Barnes went on trial again for his commentary on Romans, but was acquitted.
    - ii. In 1837, the Old School majority met before GA with a clear plan of action to abolish the Plan of Union and implement strict doctrinal and credential reforms.
    - iii. At the 1838 GA, pandemonium broke loose as each side read protests against each other and attempted to censure on another. The New School actually formed its own GA in the back of the building.
    - iv. It should be noted that the New School post-1838 morphed into being less extreme or vocal and tried to find an identity within the Presbyterian church.
    - v. The Old School flourished on its own, particularly in doctrine and polity.
- 3. Final Reflections
  - a. How did the Presbyterian church even get to this point?
  - b. Are doctrines like the New England theology espoused really that important for us, even to the point of division?
  - c. Jesus prays in John 17:20-23 for his church to have unity. What are the appropriate bounds of church unity?

Next Week...*The Move Toward Unity*