

American Presbyterian History

Week 5 – Old Side-New Side Controversy

Trinity Presbyterian Church

1. The Historical Context

- a. The early growth of the American Presbyterian church.
 - i. Soon after the formation of the first presbytery (1706) and synod (1716), the church began to grow throughout the colonies.
 - ii. As the churches grew and expanded, new ministerial candidates were needed.
- b. Revivalism and the First Great Awakening
 - i. The Awakening was set against the backdrop of perceived spiritual apathy.
 - ii. Its initial reforming intent soon gave way to a revivalist ideal. This led to a great deal of emotionalism, religious fervor, fanaticism, and seeking an experience.
 - iii. The Presbyterians were split on the revivalism sweeping across the colonies.
- c. Gilbert Tennent (1703-1764) and the Log College
 - i. In the sermon “The Danger of an Unconverted Clergy,” Tennent thought about ½ of the ministers were unconverted because they were not able to recount a definitive conversion experience.
 - ii. He believed that those opposed to revival were not true Christians.
 - iii. With the Log College, he sought to raise up a new generation of ministers less concerned with the confessional doctrines in favor of pursuing a religious zeal.
- d. Itinerant preaching
 - i. Most of the preachers during the Great Awakening were itinerant preachers, did not respect the bounds of the established presbyteries, nor were invited.
 - ii. Moreover, many of these preachers were not only stressing a religious experience, but also implicitly questioning the clergy also.
 - iii. This combination served to deemphasize among the laity the regular ministers in their ordinary ministry within the local churches and to create distance.
- e. Much of this boiled down to concerns between doctrine and experience in the ministry.
 - i. Can – or should – religious experience come at the expense of proper doctrine?
 - ii. This also affected how new ministry candidates would be trained.



2. The Old Side-New Side Controversy

- a. The Old Side
 - i. They held to firm confessional convictions and believed them necessary for a proper and lasting ministry.

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- ii. They were not against religious experience or zeal *per se*, but it needed to be grounded in biblical doctrine.
 - iii. Not everyone needed to be able to recount a specific conversion experience. This came down to the nature of true faith.
 - iv. They viewed the revivalism with great caution due to their doctrinal concerns.
 - v. They put value on theological education and a learned ministry.
 - vi. They took issue with all the itinerant preaching going on because of its undermining both of the local churches and the presbytery bounds.
- b. The New Side
- i. They put a great emphasis on religious experience and zeal in the Christian life at the expense of looser confessional convictions.
 - ii. They saw “dead orthodoxy” as getting in the way of Christian piety and living.
 - iii. Authentic Christian conversion was the ability to recount an experience.
 - iv. They greeted the revivalism and enthusiasm that was sweeping across the land.
 - v. Theological convictions could be set aside in favor of training pious ministers.
 - vi. Most of the Presbyterian itinerant preachers had New Side convictions, and they joined in the revivalist preaching to spread their ideals.
- c. A split arose between the Old and New Sides in 1741.
- i. The Old Side protested and claimed to be the true Presbyterian church.
 - ii. They ended up splitting into two synods over Old and New Side lines.
- d. With the Plan of Union in 1758, both sides reunited back into one church.
- i. Both sides came to a mutual understanding and struck a compromise.
 - ii. All ministry candidates had to affirm the Westminster Standards, and also had to recount a conversion experience.
 - iii. Ultimately, the New Side came out on top as the compromise said the revivals were a work of the Spirit, and it was a vindication of the New Sides ideas
3. Final Reflections:
- a. Are strong theological convictions at odds with Christian piety and zeal?
 - b. What makes a true Christian? Is covenantal conversion (growing into faith) any less valid than being able to recount a conversion experience?
 - c. What happens when we begin to deconfessionalize or get away from our confessions?

Next week...National Reorganization and *Westward Expansion*